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BERT SPRUNG THROUGH THE CURTAIN INTO THE ROOM. "IT IS TRUE!" HE CRIED, IN A CLEAR VOICE.

Basement Bert, The Boy Cobbler Detective;

OR,

On the War-path for Crooked Scalps.

BY JO PIERCE,

AUTHOR OF "CITIZEN RUBE," "GOOD-FOR-NOTHING JERRY," "CALEB CINDERS," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

CAUGHT IN THE CAB.

"HULLO! there's a racket, Ches!"

Two boys were walking up Broadway, when, near Astor place, they were roused to fresh interest by an unusual scene. At the junction of the streets, and in the middle of that last named, a man was disputing the passage of a vehicle, and enforcing his oral demands with an umbrella upraised over the heads of the horses.

The vehicle was such as could often be seen in the streets of New York, and decidedly stylish; while the lowered top revealed a well-dressed couple inside. But the man with the umbrella was no familiar figure of metropolitan life; one glance was enough to show that he came from rural regions.

He was talking loudly and flourishing his arms, evidently with the intention of keeping the vehicle where it was, but the driver, bestirring himself from manifest surprise, suddenly showed that fiery temper for which New York Jehus are noted.

Bringing the whip down on the frightened horses, he sent them ahead with a rush, and the shoulder of one struck the man with the umbrella and sent him rolling in the mud.

By the time he had recovered his feet the boys had reached the spot, but the bewildered farmer looked in vain for the vehicle. He was severely shaken up, and could not see very distinctly, anyhow.

"Where's my umbrella?" he suddenly asked.

One of the boys put it in his hand.

"Now, where's that team?"

"Guess you've lost it, uncle; I saw it gettin' away like a cyclone, an' it's out o' sight now."

"Say, that's miser'ble luck! D'ye see a sheriff—I mean a policeman, anywhere?"

"He'll come erlong jest after you are done wantin' him, colonel."

"I'd give him five dollahs to arrest that woman!"

"Which woman?"

"The one in the wagon—my wife!"

"Oh! so she's out ridin' with a better-lookin' man, eh?"

"Hang the othah man! I don't care for him; what I want, sah, is what she stole from me. I've come all the way from South Cah'lina to ketch her, and now she gives me the slip the moment I do see her. By thunder! that's bad, for I've been lookin' a whole week for her already. But this village is so miser'ble big that I only git lost in it."

"Never mind. She'll git lost, too."

"She? I don't reckon so. She's no South Cah'lina woman, but a New Yorkah; an' I'll bet suthin' she knows every street an' beer-saloon heah. Anyhow, she can drink any man in my county to the blush, an' South Cah'lina ain't very slow, sah!"

The speaker had not attempted to pursue the carriage, but had run his hands over the dirt accumulated when he fell, and settled that part to his own satisfaction; though, as he had smeared the mud over, rather than removed it, he really had not improved matters, and his hands were unpleasantly soiled.

He was not a handsome man, anyway, and the pointed beard which ornamented his chin, and his big felt hat, were anything but characteristic of New York.

Several persons had been collected by his adventure, few of whom gave him any more comfort than what lay in smiles of amusement and words of humorous advice. He was advised to pursue the carriage on foot, and run it down, but a look eastward toward the tangle of streets around Cooper Institute was not calculated to raise his confidence.

He resented this sarcastic advice, too, knowing just what it was worth, while the grave remarks of the boy already recorded, furnished such a contrast that he suddenly added:

"Young man, I'd like to speak in private with you. S'pose we jest step around the cornah an' talk?"

"All right, colonel."

Both boys went along, and they were soon on Lafayette Place. The Southerner paused opposite the Astor Library.

"What's youah name?" he inquired.

"Bert Lincoln, t'otherwise known as Basement Bert."

"What's that?"

The information was repeated.

"You have a name like a Western cowboy. Why are you called Basement Bert?"

"I work fer a cobbler, ez his 'prentice, an' his shop is in the basement. This is my frien' an' runnin'-mate, Ches Day."

"I'm Andrew Moss, from Horry county, South Cah'lina—but that don't count. Do you know of any matrimonial bureau anywhere around heah?"

Basement Bert grinned humorously.

"Be you lookin' fer a wife?" he asked.

"Be I?" Mr. Moss cried. "I reckon not! I ain't in the primer class, now. No, I ain't lookin' for a wife, an' ef I was, I shouldn't look in New York; I've had all experience with New York wives I want!"

"Did you get her at a matrimonial bureau?"

Andrew drew a sigh which seemed to come from a long distance.

"I did!" he confessed, sadly. "I did, an' that's what makes all my trouble now. You seen me upset in the road a minute ago. That was my wife in the carriage, an' a costly luxury she proved. I came all the way up heah from South Cah'lina to get a wife, an' found her at Wise, Temple & Nugent's Select Matrimonial Bureau. They showed me her picture, an' she was as pooty as you please. I seen her, an' what do you s'pose? She wanted to know just how much money I had, an' demanded five hundred dollahs down. I seen she was affah the mighty dollah, but thought such a good business woman would be an advantage to me, an' would make things hum."

"Did she?"

"Young man, she *did*! There was the greatest hummin' around there that you evah seen, an' mostly caused by my dollahs which she was makin' spin. She spent money right an' left, an' galivanted around like mad. Finally I went to her, an' says I: 'This climate ain't good for you; ef you want, you may go home—an' stay!' 'Not a go!' says she, brazen as you please. The long an' short of it is, I gave her one thousand dollahs in cash to go away forevah, an' save me from bankruptcy."

"Great Scott! she was a costly wife!"

"She about ruined me, young man. I'd let her gone with a happy mind, though, ef she hadn't turned thief. When she went away she stole the deed to my farm, which never had been recorded, an' that was too much for me. I left Horry county an' come heah, an' I don't intend to leave until I get them papahs back. I've hunted for days, an' only got my first sight of her to-day, an' now she's got away."

"You're playin' in hard luck, daddy."

"Hard? Why, that woman's cost me a clear three thousand dollahs!"

"Why don't yer hev her arrested, ef you want yer papers back?"

"I've got a detective, but he ain't done anything, as far's I kin see, but draw his pay."

"He may be a skin."

"New York's full on 'em," returned Mr. Moss, with a doleful sigh. "Them matrimonial bureau men are too mean to eat Christian food."

"Have you seen them?"

"Have I? Ef I had, there would 'a' been a first-class funeral around these parts, young man; I'd licked them, or got licked! They cheated me outrageous on my bargain. My wife was warranted kind, gentle, not to balk or kick—I mean, she's warranted ter hev a good disposition an' be a model housekeeper. An' how she *did* carry on down in Horry county! Why, she scandalized the place. Ef I could find them matrimonial fiends I'd thrash them like sin, but they've moved their shop, an' I can't find a clew ter them."

This narrative was very amusing to both Bert Lincoln and Ches Day.

They were New York boys born and bred, and were aware that such things as "matrimonial bureaus" existed in the metropolis, but, like most other New Yorkers, had but a limited knowledge of such institutions.

One thing, always well-known and now emphasized, was that the "bureaus" made a good deal of money out of unsophisticated people living at a distance; and it was not hard to surmise that Andrew's wife had been a designing woman who had married him merely to get all the money she could.

"You'll run onder them yit," Bert remarked, encouragingly.

"I run on to my wife, but I didn't get her. Fact is, I don't know enough about this village—city, I mean—an' its ways, to do the work propahly."

"You'll learn."

"Tell ye what, young man, I'd like to hiah you."

"Hire me? What fer?"

"To go around with me, help me hunt, tell me what to do an' not to do; to act as my guide."

"What's it worth ter you?"

"I never cheat no man who works for me; I'll give ye a dollah a day."

"That ain't bad, an' I'll think of it."

"S'pose you know New York?"

"Know New York? Do you know your farm?"

Mr. Moss looked more attentively at Basement Bert. The latter was not over fifteen years old, but, like most New York boys, he had age not to be counted by years. People learn fast in the island city, and no one faster than the young. Bert Lincoln was wise beyond his years—wise in a double sense.

He knew all about the tricks and traps of Gotham, and had common sense enough not to be a trapper of men, or entrapped by them. In other words, he was too honest to infringe on the laws, and too shrewd to be victimized by "sharpers," "crooks," "dead beats" and "skins."

He had a bright, intelligent face, but no one would have mistaken him for a resident of Murray Hill. He was very plainly dressed, but his garments were whole and clean.

Ches Day, his companion, was much like him.

The man from South Carolina was so much impressed that he was determined to engage Bert, at any cost, but the latter was not sure he wanted the chance; if he took it, he might yet learn there was no fun in piloting around a countryman who was on the war-path. He finally agreed to take the rest of the afternoon to think it over, and to meet Andrew near Cooper Institute at a stated hour in the evening to give an answer.

When all this was arranged, Mr. Moss left them and walked on down Lafayette place.

"Say, w'ot d'ye think o' this, Ches?" asked Bert.

"Why, I couldn't hardly keep from snickerin' right in his face!"

"He's in a heap o' trouble."

"Yes; but what do you think of a man who would get a wife at sech a place?"

"I think *this* one got cheated. Some out-an'-out sharper picked him up fer a blockhead, an' she sized him up right. Hullo! what does Andrew see, there?"

The man from Horry county had reached a point where a cab was standing by the curbstone. Suddenly he stopped, hesitated, turned and approached the vehicle as if some one within it had addressed him.

The boys watched with curiosity.

All at once Andrew disappeared inside the cab as if he had been fired out of a cannon, and then the team dashed away down the street at full speed.

CHAPTER II.

THE MYSTERY OF THE ROOM.

"SAY! what's the meanin' o' that?"

Bert gazed after the retreating cab in surprise, for the whole scene was unusual and unexpected.

"Should say Andrew had gone fer a ride," replied Ches, gravely.

"Mighty funny way ter go."

"He went in like as ef he'd got a start from a spring-board."

"Ches, I b'lieve the old gent has been kidnapped. Hustle after them! He's my charge now."

Both boys ran down Lafayette place at full speed. Not much time had been lost in their rapid exchange of words, but the cab had gained a good start before they recovered from their first surprise.

Before they had gone many yards it had whisked out of sight, evidently having turned eastward through Great Jones street. They continued the search, but failed to find it; it had gained some favorable point and lost itself among other vehicles.

"That's w'ot I call odd!" Ches declared.

"Guess Andrew won't meet me ter-night."

"What d'ye think?"

"Kidnapped!" Bert confidently decided.

"Who should want him?"

"Don't know. Don't see why his wife should, fer she went ter the extreme o' havin' him run over fer the sake o' gettin' red o' him, but it's jest possible that she sees he's dangerous, prancin' around an' hankerin' ter get back the stolen papers; an' has took this chance ter gobble him."

"The old gent has fell among thieves; that's clear to my opine. Guess next time he gits married he won't go to a matrimonial bureau."

"Dunno but we ought ter notify the perleece. We don't know why he went in that cab, nor who he went with, but the signs is ag'in' the idee that he took a ride under proper circumstances."

"Reckon we had better tell a cop."

"Hullo! what's this?"

Bert had noticed what seemed to be an empty envelope on the sidewalk at his feet, and had kicked it in mechanical fashion. The result surprised him; the envelope turned over, and an address looked him in the face. He picked it up quickly.

"Andrew Moss, No. —, Greenwich avenue," he read.

"B'jinks! that's our Horry county hayseed!"

"But how'd this get here?"

"He dropped it, likely."

"It skipped out the cab, by accident or design. Mebbe Andrew throwed it. Anyhow, we've got his address, it seems, an' I guess we'd better slide over an' notify his friends, ef he's got any there."

A letter was inside, and they read it to see if any new points could be gained. It was from Horry county, and referred to the most commonplace of affairs relating to a farm in that section.

After a little consultation, they decided to carry the letter to Greenwich avenue, and went accordingly.

The boys were fast friends. As Bert's words had indicated, he was the apprentice of a cobbler. The latter had a shop in a basement where old shoes were rejuvenated, and his sign at the door informed the public that shoes would be called for and delivered when desired. When trade was slack, this was a part of Bert's business, but when business grew brisker, Ches Day was often employed to carry the shoes to and from the shop. Bert could drive the awl and the pegs equal to many persons much older than he, and was a promising apprentice.

Arriving at the designated number on Greenwich avenue, Bert rung the bell and a servant appeared.

"Is Mr. Andrew Moss in?" he asked.

"No, he ain't," was the quick reply. "How many more times do you want ter know?"

"Can't say, dead sure, but, as this is my first inquiry, I can't skeercely see why you ask the question."

"Don't you come from them other men?"

"What men?"

"Them who was askin' fer Andrew before."

"So he's been asked after previous?"

"Two men came in a cab an' was mighty anxious ter see him. Can't imagine what there is about that old foggy that anybody wants ter see him!"

"Was the men in the cab frien's o' his'n?"

"Don't know nothin' erbout it."

"Do yer know ef Andrew has any enemies, who would be likely ter do him harm?"

"I don't know nothin' about him, except that he's up here from the South ter look fer a wife who has done him up. He's told us that a dozen times."

Bert explained what he and Ches had seen, but the servant was not affected thereby.

"It ain't my funeral!" she declared.

"But s'pose he's kidnapped?"

"Then mebbe it'll learn him ter stay at home, an' not be tryin' ter run New York himself."

"He's your boarder, I take it, an' you oughter show more hooman feelin' fer him. We've got some reg'lar sharks in New York, an' some on 'em may hev gobbled the old gent."

"My old woman is out, an' I don't care ter act as boss, but ef you're friends o' his, I'll say that the men who called in a cab left a note up in his room. It's sealed, but I'll take the risk of breakin' it open, ef you say so."

"Do it!" Bert advised. "It may be a decoy, an' give us jest the clew we want. Lead on!"

The three went to a chamber which was small and meanly furnished, showing Andrew's economical turn of mind, and the servant at once opened the letter. It proved to be very brief, and read as follows:

"A. Moss, Esq.:—

"DEAR SIR:—If you want to find what you are looking after, be at the corner of University place and Ninth street, to-night, at eight o'clock. I like to help a man when I can, but mu task you not to divulge my name in this case. By working on the quiet we are likely to win, but anything rash will fix things so I shall be powerless to help you."

"ABRAM ALDEN."

Bert nodded emphatically.

"Just as I thought," he declared; "this is a decoy. Of course there is no Abram Alden, an' the note was fixed up by Andrew's enemies. How they got him afore he had a chance ter read the decoy I can't say fer sure, but it looks ter me as ef they happened on him, an' gobbled him. He seemed took all by surprise when he was yanked inter the cab. 'Twas a bold act, anyhow!"

The servant looked down the stairs.

"Somebody's openin' the front door," she observed. "It may be our Hawbuck friend."

A key had clicked in the street door, and it now opened. The servant looked in wonder when she saw who entered. It was a young woman.

"Hullo! what does that mean? She don't belong here."

The stranger was coming swiftly and silently up the stairs.

"Wait an' watch!" Bert advised. "There may be fun here!"

As he spoke he pulled the servant back, and, with her and Ches Day, he took refuge in the passage which led to the next room. From there they could see all that occurred, and would themselves be invisible unless the prowler saw fit to invade their retreat.

She entered Andrew's room as unhesitatingly as if she had been there frequently before.

"Quite a good-looker!" Ches whispered.

"In her case the 'good' is only skin deep. She's a corker!"

There seemed to be good grounds for Bert's declaration. The woman was still young, being less than thirty; and had a form and face that rendered her attractive. Many persons would have called her handsome, but the critical eye would have dwelt more upon the fact that she had a bold and independent air which did not speak well for her.

Bert had not had a good view of the woman in the carriage on Astor place, but he was of the opinion this one was not the same, and Ches confirmed the opinion by whispering:

"Another woman in the game, old man! This one ain't so pooty as Andrew's charmer."

"Ain't she got the cheek!" muttered the servant, filled with anger at the stranger's cool assurance.

The latter remained unconscious of this scrutiny, but went on with her work in the same rapid fashion noticed before, all of which evinced desire to get out of the house as soon as possible.

She first advanced to the table, saw the note recently opened by the servant, gave it a close survey, and then put it in her pocket. This done, she produced a package from under the shawl she wore, looked critically around the room; then advanced and thrust the little package into a valise which stood at one side, unlocked, and with its contents a good deal stirred up.

"That's old Moss's!" whispered the servant.

"Some new game against him," Bert inferred.

Although the valise had been open, the young woman closed and locked it carefully, but left the key in the lock. All this was very mysterious, and none of the watchers was able to understand it.

Everything had been done by the unknown in the swiftest way possible, and she now turned toward the hall. Evidently, it was her intention to depart as silently as she had come, but there was an obstacle in the way. The servant did not intend to let matters go on thus, and she had gained the hall by the door of the second room just ahead of the stranger.

When the latter opened the door, Kate, the servant, stood before her. She stopped short, with evidence of apprehension.

"Well, you're havin' a fine time, ain't yer?" Kate asked, with sarcasm.

"Beg pardon, but I think I am in the wrong house," was the amiable reply.

"I guess you are."

"Does Mrs. Turbidy live here?"

"No; but Andrew Moss does!"

"I have made a mistake. I thought I was right, and, the door being open, walked in—"

"Yes, you did! You opened the door with a key, an' what I want ter know is where did you get that key?"

"I had no key."

"That's a whopper, an' these boys kin prove it."

"Right, Sariah Jane," Bert asserted. "We seen the whole thing done, an' it behooves you ter make a clean breast o' the whole gallus business. Speak up!"

CHAPTER III.

BERT COMES IN AT THE CRISIS.

THE strange woman ignored Bert, and answered Kate in a haughty style.

"You forget yourself, girl! Remember you are addressing a superior!"

"I'm not so sure of that."

"Do I look like a servant?"

"You're built about right fer a shoplifter!" Kate retorted.

"I shall report your impertinence to your mistress, unless you allow me to pass at once. I came in by mistake, for which I am sorry, but I'll smash you in the face if you say I ain't a lady. I move in the best of society, and can refer you to—"

She named two well-known ladies of New York. Kate was not in the least deceived. She knew this woman was of low rank in life, and her brazen claims caused no effect. Something else did, however. Bert had gained a new idea, and getting out of the range of the stranger's eyes, he framed the following words with his lips:

"Let her go, an' I'll dog her!"

Kate was as skillful as most of her sex in understanding this method of signaling, and she caught at the plan at once. Her mistress was away, and she did not like the idea of taking too much responsibility upon her own shoulders. The unknown had stolen nothing—Kate forgot the note at that moment, and did not regard it as valuable, anyhow—so why not get rid of her?

For Bert Lincoln's sake, the girl used strategy.

"I'll tell you what," she answered; "you wait an' see my mistress."

"Why should I?"

"I don't want the responsibility."

"Then stand out of the way and let me pass. Come, girl, it is absurd for you to think ill of me. I made the most natural mistake in the world, and am very sorry for it. Here is a dollar; take it, and let me go."

Kate pretended to hesitate.

"If you'll give me brothers ten cents apiece, I'll do it," she finally returned.

The stranger looked relieved, and closed the bargain.

"You are a sensible girl," she then commented, and made for the door with quick, eager steps.

"How will you foller an' not be seen?" the servant asked, of Bert.

"Trust me fer that!"

As soon as the door closed, Bert was beside it; as soon as the unknown was fairly clear of the premises, he opened the door a little. A tradesman's wagon in front of the house gave him an idea.

"Let me go alone, Ches," he directed, "an' I'll do some shadow work. Don't show yerself an' betray me."

The stranger was going southward. A few quick steps took Bert to the cover of the wagon. Just then the owner came out, and the boy cobbler had another idea.

"Mister," he said, quickly, "I'll give ye ten cents ef you'll let me hev a ride."

The driver proved to be strangely good-natured.

"Pile on!" he directed, "and never mind the dime."

Here was good fortune which Bert had not expected, and it continued when his new friend gathered up the reins and went jogging lazily down Greenwich avenue. The woman was walking briskly, and they kept at just about the proper distance from her. Several times she looked around to see if she was pursued, but looked only at the street; Bert remained undiscovered.

In this way they went to Eighth street, but the plan worked no longer. The woman turned to the left, while the team kept on down Sixth avenue. The amateur detective sprang down and resumed the pursuit on foot.

The eastern end of Clinton place is not the most aristocratic or beautiful part of New York. The houses look as if they had gone to seed, and only needed a strong wind to come down in a heap. Extremes in certain lines meet there, however, and a high-class political club offsets the saloons that skulk in the basements.

In one of these houses the unknown woman was "rounded up." She entered, and Bert was left to gaze at the bare walls. He noted the number of the house, but did not know what use he would make of the knowledge.

Unless he went to the police, to whom was he to tell the incident?

While he still hesitated, a man came out and paused on the stoop. Glancing around, he seemed uncertain until he caught sight of the boy. Seeing him, he beckoned the lad to approach.

For a moment the latter hesitated, but, determining to see what was wanted, he went forward.

"Do you wish to do an errand?" the man asked.

"Yes, sir."

"Come in here, then."

Bert had not expected this, and he had occasion to hesitate again, but remembering the woman had before seen him only in a dimly-lighted hall, he decided to take the risk. It might bring him to grief, but he was in for the adventure, and bound to see it out. He walked in coolly.

"We have a letter we want carried," the man explained. "Come up-stairs and you shall have it, with a suitable reward for your labor."

Still Bert kept on, but not without doubts.

"Mebbe the young female see me follerin' her, an' that I'm in the lion's maw," he thought, "but I'm like Jonah—liable ter come up, ag'in!"

He was ushered into a pleasant room and told to wait, and, directly after the departure of his guide, voices rose in the next room to a high pitch.

Bert wished to see and hear these speakers, and there was no good reason why he should not. The rooms were connected by sliding doors. These were ajar nearly an inch, though drapery pendent from a rod on the other side made the aperture invisible there.

He introduced a finger and moved the curtain a little, whereupon he had view of the other room and the four persons who proved to be its occupants.

Of these two were men and two were women, his recently-made acquaintances forming one pair. The second pair—Bert hesitated. He had not clearly seen the man and the woman in the carriage at Astor place, but he believed they were now before him.

"I say, burn the letter!" the second man was saying. "We are playing too bold a game lately."

"Are you afraid?" asked the first man.

"Gently, Draper! I've twisted the noses of other men, ere now, for saying less than that. Ask any sport in the city who knows Jack Wilson if he's a coward, and see what they say. But I hope I have common sense. We ran the matrimonial bureau as Wise, Temple & Nugent until reckless work compelled us to quit. Now I'm in the biz again as Norman Holmes—with 'Rev.' prefixed to tickle the private ear of customers—and shall do well, if we don't slop over."

"You've always credited me with forming brilliant plots," grumbled Draper.

"Brilliant but reckless. So with Pearl," and he indicated the second of the women—she who, Bert thought, had been in the carriage at Astor place. "She went South with that old haw-buck, fleeced him nicely, had the boodle in her pocket and him in a frame of mind so he would have blessed the day that took her forever out of his sight; but, before leaving Horry county, she had to steal his private papers, and now he's in New York, howling for revenge like a mad bull."

"That was foolish," Pearl admitted.

"Then, to-day, you had to kidnap old Moss, in the mistaken belief that such was the way to down him. You never erred more; the proper way was for us to lie low and let him rage. The matrimonial bureau of Wise, Temple & Nugent had disappeared forever, and there was but little danger of Moss finding the office of Norman Holmes, and recognizing me as 'Wise.' Even the police are ignorant of my new place, so far."

"Then how is Moss to find it?"

"He was floundering around helplessly, and would soon have blown out of New York. Now, we either must hold him—and he will be an elephant on our hands—or, letting him loose, see him go to the police and ask for help. Sadie has gone over to Greenwich avenue and let folks there look at her, all for a purpose I should have sat right down on, had I known of it."

Draper, Pearl and Sadie were silent, but Norman Holmes went on complainingly:

"Worst of all, Pearl sees fit to decoy this girl away—What's her name?"

"Adrea Warland."

"Yes. A girl of wealth, who is of no more use to us than Jumbo's skeleton."

"I'm going to teach her to lift silks and lure idiots, and, as she is 'way up in high society, she will be worth her weight in gold. I've got her, and I'm going to keep her!"

Pearl made the answer defiantly, evidently tired of being criticised, and the wrangle went on warmly.

Basement Bert was not at loss to understand the condition of affairs. The four persons before him were veritable human vampires; they lived by their wits, and preyed upon their fellow-beings. The woman called Pearl was the same who had married honest Andrew Moss, and fleeced him.

"Here's a nice nest fer the perleece ter raid," thought the Boy Cobbler, "an' I'll see that they hev knowledge on't ez soon ez I git out. Oh! you sharks, you think you kin rattle along ez you please, don't yer?"

The hall door suddenly opened and a fine-looking young man entered the room where the conspirators sat. They started guiltily at sight of him, but, as he stood in silence, looking around the place critically, Holmes rallied and roughly exclaimed:

"You've made a mistake, man! You're in the wrong room."

"No, sir!" was the quick answer. "I am in the right room, and I came here by bribing the servant. I am Meredith Warland, and I'm here to ask yonder woman"—pointing to Pearl—"where my sister Adrea is?"

"What do we know of your sister?" Holmes angrily replied.

"You have lured her away."

"It is false!"

Pushing the doors further apart, Bert sprung through the curtains into the room.

"It is true!" he cried, in a clear voice. "These are the villains! I heard them confess the crime, an' I'm here ter back up my words!"

CHAPTER IV.

A MAN WITH A MISSION.

BASEMENT BERT had acted wholly upon impulse. The moment he saw Meredith Warland he felt positive that a young fellow of sterling character was before him.

Bert at once became deeply interested, and without waiting to see whether Warland would carry his point, he had sprung out as described and flung the straightforward assertion at them like a bomb.

All eyes were turned upon the new intruder: Warland's in surprise, and the sharper's in anger and dismay. Draper's face flushed ominously.

"Get back into your kennel!" he ordered, threateningly.

"Why so?" Bert retorted. "The dogs are here!"

"I tell you, get back—"

Draper rose and advanced with clinched hands, but Warland interfered.

"Wait!" he commanded. "This boy has made an assertion which interests me, and I am going to hear its meaning. Speak out, lad; what do you know of my sister?"

"He knows nothing."

"Bet yer life, I know something—too much fer your good, my cove!"

"The boy never saw any of us until ten minutes ago."

"I've used my ears sence then."

"This is a boy who works for me and is angry because I detected him stealing money from me and chastised him—"

"Oh, come, now! that won't do!" interrupted Bert, with perfect coolness. "First thing you know you'll hev a suit fer slander on yer hands, an' ez I never see you until a few minutes ago, you'd find it hard ter prove yer p'int. Mister," to Meredith Warland, "don't yer swaller none o' his yarns. I say I heard—"

"Put that boy out!" cried Pearl, "or I'll do it myself. I won't sit and listen to the young Judas."

Norman Holmes rose. He was rather glad that the reckless course of his allies had brought them to grief, but, for the sake of his own prosperity, it was clear that he must prevent Bert from speaking. He took a step toward the cobbler, but Warland interfered.

"Let the boy alone!" he commanded. "Your anxiety lest he should speak only betrays guilty fears, and I am going to hear what he has to tell. Speak out, my lad!"

"He said—"

"Get out of here!" shouted Holmes. "If you are going to form a partnership and run your

lies together, you must do it somewhere else than here. Get out, both of you!"

"First tell me where my sister is," persisted Warland.

Holmes motioned to Draper, who took place beside him.

"Now, will you go?"

"That's right!" exclaimed Pearl; "don't you be bluffed, Norm, and if they give you any back talk, just 'light on their jaws!"

"I will save you from the necessity of obeying this refined lady," Meredith remarked, ironically. "The odds are rather against me here, and, in any case, I have no desire to blossom out as a shoulder-hitter. I will retire, as you request, but"—he had reached the door, and spoke the next words from there—"you shall hear from me again!"

The sharpeners were silent and inactive, but far from calm and indifferent. The final assertion was understood. They knew that another man was on the war-path after them.

But Warland was allowed to depart, and Basement Bert went with him.

On the sidewalk Warland paused.

"Did they tell the truth about you? Are you a disgruntled employee?"

"Never seen them until just afore you come in, mister. One on 'em 'costed me on the street, an' axed me did I want a job; but when they got me inside they began ter quarrel 'mongst themselves, an' the war was still on w'en you showed up."

"You will do—at least, I hope so, for I am about to place great confidence in you. Those knaves, or, rather, Pearl Montessor, so-called, has lured my sister away. Adrea is a noble girl in many ways, but is adventuresome, and has always rebelled against dull life at home. She met this Montessor female, was attracted to, and went away with her. Adrea is very young, and harm may come to her unless she is rescued."

"I see, mister."

"Her salvation depends on recovering her. Do you know if she is in that house?"

"No; I don't know."

"I will try to have them arrested at once. If my understanding of law is correct, it would be useless to apply to the policeman on this beat; I must have a warrant. It is not far to Police Headquarters, and I think my best way is to go there immediately, and put the case in the hands of a responsible person. The question is, will you remain here on watch?"

"I will, that! Jest count me in in this scrimmage."

"Keep your attention always on the house, and if they leave, follow. Here are two dollars; you may need to take a cab in the pursuit. If you hivy them, go at once to Police Headquarters and make your report. You shall be paid. Be faithful, and you shall not lose by it. I am off."

Meredith hurried away, and Bert settled down to his task.

"I feel myself in my true biz now," he soliloquized, as he watched. "Never did think I was cut out fer a cobbler, though my boss says I kin drive a peg like a pile-driver. But the detective line jest fits my curves an' angles. Wonder w'ot they're doin' in thar?"

He had ample time to wonder, for Holmes and his allies did not appear. Bert had taken position where he would not be discovered easily from the house, for it was not his intention to let them know they were watched, but his espionage never relaxed.

It was zeal unrewarded, for when Meredith reappeared with a detective, not a person had emerged from the house.

"That's odd!" declared the detective.

"And lucky," Warland added.

"I'm not so sure of that. Would they sit down in idleness and await the arrest sure to come? I fear they have played some trump card and levanted. We must investigate."

The officer on the beat at this juncture approached, and the detective added him to the party. They went to the house and rung the bell. A servant appeared.

"Is Norman Holmes in?"

"I think so."

"We wish to see him. Never mind about taking our names; we know his room, and will go right up."

The servant did not oppose this plan, and her matter-of-fact manner indicated that there were some honest persons in the house.

The detective led the way up-stairs and knocked at the door of the front room. There was no answer, and he turned the knob and threw the door open.

The room was untenanted!

Bert glanced toward the rear room, where he had been left when he first entered the house. The sliding doors were widely ajar, and no one in sight. The searchers regarded each other in perplexity.

"We've been outwitted, as I feared," declared the detective.

"How could we be? They are still in the house—"

"Unless this boy—"

The officer hesitated to finish the sentence, and Bert observed, with dignity:

"Ef you think I've neglected my duty, or played yer false, you are 'way off yer pedestal, mister."

"Let me call the servant."

This was done. She came with an inquiring, fearless air of innocence which again impressed all.

"We fail to find Holmes and the other occupants of these rooms," remarked the officer.

"That is odd, for they were here a short time ago, and I have not seen them go out."

"Do they own the house?"

"Oh, no, they merely hire these two rooms."

"Are you sure they are not now in the house?"

"If they are, they are in a place where they have no right to go."

"I am an officer, and will now search the place."

The servant looked startled, but did not object. Her mistress was out, so she accompanied them wherever they went, and answered all questions freely. The Holmes party, she said, had taken the rooms only a week before, but had exhibited a penchant for the company of strong drink which was not in their favor.

The most rigid search now failed to reveal them in the house, but their way of flight was finally ascertained.

By means of good luck and agility at climbing they had reached a saloon not far away, entered at the rear, passed out at the front, and escaped.

All this the saloon-keeper admitted, but he stoutly declared he was not aware that they were seeking to escape the police.

"Anyhow," the detective remarked, to young Warland, "we are just now foiled. But we are on the war-path, and it's dollars to doughnuts the crooks will see us again."

"They'll see me again; bet yer dollars on that!" added Bert.

CHAPTER V.

TROUBLE FOR THE SOUTHERN DELEGATION.

WHEN the party came to separate, Basement Bert found he was left out of the deal. Warland gave him a five-dollar bill without seeming to think himself over-generous, and observed:

"This is for your trouble, my lad, and if you ever get mixed up in a contest again, I hope you'll be found on the side of right and justice."

"But ain't you goin' ter hunt fer yer sister some more?"

"Most certainly I am; I'll run these hawks down, if it requires a year to do it."

"I'd like ter help."

"The work is one in which you could do no good," was the friendly reply. "However, I am much obliged for your interest. Good-day, and good luck."

Then Warland walked away with the officer, and Bert was left alone.

"That settles that!" he commented. "Guess I wa'n't cut out fer a detective, nohow; Meredith thinks so, leastways. S'pose I've got ter take 'No,' but it don't set wal. My soul has been h'isted above common things, an' is bubblin' around like a balloon in mid-air. Guess Ches Day is occupyin' my place in the cobbler-shop, an' peggin' away like mad; but my mind goes fer higher game. Reckon I'll meander 'round an' work off my fever, 'fore it gnaws my blood all up."

Acting upon this plan, he started off on a roving trip which finally brought him to Union Square. He was crossing the Park when he had a most surprising encounter. Suddenly he found himself face to face with Mr. Andrew Moss!

Bert stopped in something akin to amazement, but Moss swooped down upon him.

"Say, young man," the farmer cried, "kin you tell me where I be?"

"This is Union Square."

"Way up 'most to Central Park, ain't it?"

"Oh! no; you're two miles from it."

"Wal, I don't know where I be, but I know how I got heah."

"How was it? I thought you'd b'en kidnaped."

"Young man, set down on this bench, an' I'll tell ye all about it. I ain't had no sech time sence I left Horry county, an' I wish I's back in Cah'lina, sah; I do, by Ginerel Jackson! I nevah knew how bad a place New York was till now. When I git back I'll write a book on it; I will, suah as you live, an' I won't spare nobody. Them newspaperahs beah are all liars, for they say this is a safe place for anybody to go 'round. Guess them writer-fellahs stay right in their offices all the time, and nevah go out to see the sights!"

Bert thought Andrew would never talk himself out of breath so he could hear what was of more importance, but due patience enabled him to get the story. As told by Moss, it was a very long and rambling narrative, but the main facts may be given briefly.

He had been attracted to the cab on Lafayette place by hearing his name pronounced, and a stylish young man in the carriage looked so bland, smiling and polite, that Andrew advanced to hear what he had to say. Immediately he was seized and pulled into the cab, the driver of which then whipped up his horses and dashed away.

The Southerner struggled in vain, and his captor made no explanation. They drove "for miles," as Moss expressed it, and then stopped in front of a house. He was taken in and put in a locked room, where he remained a long time.

Finally he was taken out, put in the cab again, driven many blocks to a quiet street, and ordered to step out and leave at once. He did so, and after some wandering, brought up at Union Square.

He had not the remotest idea where he had gone on either journey, or where the house was located in which he had been imprisoned; while the whole affair puzzled him greatly.

Why had he been kidnapped and then released?

Bert believed he could answer this question. Norman Holmes had overruled Draper's judgment; the one had seized him, and the other ordered his release. Andrew's description of his captor about fitted Draper.

"It was rough on me," Andrew concluded, "an' I'd have yelled right out, only he had a pistol, an' said he'd shoot me ef I tried to give an alarm."

"Don't you suppose you could lead the way ter where they shut ye up?" Bert asked.

"Bless me, no; I ain't any idee, an' this great Babel of a city is wuss than a wilderness."

"What'll you do now?"

Moss sighed deeply.

"I don't know; I'm all beat out an' discouraged. I tell ye, a man brought up in a nice, respectable place like Horry county ain't fit to be in this wicked city."

"You want yer stolen papers back?"

"I do, an', by Ginerel Jackson! I'll have them!"

"Then go ter the perleece."

"Why, I've heerd they was the worst thieves in New York!"

Bert devoted considerable time to putting Andrew on the right track, and finally made that gentleman promise to see some one at Police Headquarters in the morning. If the boy could have given Meredith Warland's address Andrew would have called on him, but this Bert did not know.

The hour was getting late, so the cobbler bade his new acquaintance good-night and started homeward. Andrew lingered, waiting to collect energy enough to set out on his own road home. While thus occupied he observed two men approach in whom he at once felt an interest.

One was of tall, athletic figure, and must have weighed nearly two hundred pounds. He had a big, gray beard that gave him a patriarchal look. His companion was much smaller, and would weigh not over one hundred and thirty pounds. He was about thirty years old, dark-complexioned, and smooth-shaven with the exception of a mustache. Both hands were partially bound up with rags, once white, but now of doubtful hue and respectability.

What interested Mr. Moss most was the fact that in the drab clothing of the strangers he recognized garments certainly not made in New York, while their big felt hats were very Southern in appearance. Scrutiny became mutual, and the strangers advanced.

"I beg your pardon, sah," said he of the big beard, politely, "but I don't suppose you hail from the South?"

"But I do, sah."

"Mississippi?"

"No, sah; Horry county, South Carolina."

"I'm from Yalobus county, Mississippi."

"Bless me! I'm glad to meet a countryman. My name is Andrew Moss."

"Mine is Reese Hackland, and my friend is Sigers Long."

There was a general hand-shaking, and the opinion prevailed that the meeting was a happy one. Each was of the opinion that his State was the grandest in the Union, and his county the finest in the State, but neither felt inclined to quarrel over opinions.

Mr. Sigers Long proved to be a hoarse-voiced man who hardly ever had anything to say, but Mr. Hackland—Long called him "The Judge," at all times—was talkative, bland, intelligent and fairly well educated. He soon grew communicative.

"You notice he has his hands bandaged?"

It was a peculiarity of "the Judge" that he always referred to Mr. Long as "he" and "him."

"Yes, sah," Andrew answered.

"Bitten by a mad dog down at his home in Yalobus county, and we came up here so he could be treated by the Pasteur method. He wanted me to come along with him, and as I kinder wanted to see what New York was like, I did it."

Mr. Long's lacerated hands were duly discussed, principally by Moss and Hackland, but the silent man had been doing some thinking, and he finally broke forth in a hoarse voice:

"Ask the Judge how he's put in time heah."

"Why, I've been all ovah—"

"Don't dodge, Judge. Fact is, Mr. Moss, he's going to take back a smart Yankee girl as a wife!"

Hackland smiled complacently, but did not receive the congratulations he expected from Andrew.

"She is a brilliant woman," he explained. "True, she's only about half as old as I am, but she's just what I need on my farm. She's got spirit enough to make the niggahs stand around and work, instead of idling. Great stroke of business it was; and I got her in a way new to me, though I am told that a half of the New Yorkers use the system. You see, I got her from a matrimonial bureau."

Andrew looked blankly at his new acquaintance.

"You did?"

"Yes; and if you are a widower in need of a wife, I advise you to go there. You see, men and women become customers, leave their pictures, have meetings, and strike up matches. Got to be a regular thing here—so the manager of the bureau tells me. Better run over, Mr. Moss. They will show you a lot of pictures of different girls, and you can take your pick—"

"Stop!" cried Moss, wildly.

"Eh?"

"Do you know who I am?"

"Eh?"

"Behold in me an unhappy wretch who has been there before! Take my pick! I've taken it once, an' my longin's are satisfied. Why, I'd rather go into Central Africa as a missionary than poke my nose through a bureau doah. Marry a New York girl! You will be so kind as to excuse me; I don't want another pick."

Andrew's manner was so tragic that the Judge regarded him in wonder.

"Have you really experimented there?" he asked.

"Experimented? Is that what you call it? Sah, I've been through the mill, and been ground to a pulp."

Hackland began to look worried and uneasy.

"Don't your wife meet your expectations?"

"She more than meets them. Expectations don't cover one-half the ground, but she fills every inch. My friend, if you value the peace an' happiness you find in Yalobus county, keep away from New York matrimonial bureaus!"

The Judge moved uneasily, while his friend regarded him with great gravity.

"Did you take her South?" Hackland, inquired.

"Like an idiot, I did. It cost me a good many dollahs to make her agree to marry me. Then we went to Horry county. Then the ruin begun. That woman scattered my money like grain in open market; dollahs fell like rain. Financial ruin stared me in the face, an' when she had got rid of two thousand in a few weeks, I finally bought her off. I gave her another thousand in cash, an' she left me an' came North, but she stole valuable papahs to wind up on, an' I am now in New York to try an' get them back. Don't talk to me about matrimonial bureaus; four thousand dollahs at one slap is too much for my appetite. Have you really been

thinkin' seriously of takin' a wife from such a place?"

"Yes," admitted the Judge, faintly.

"Don't do it!"

Hackland was silent.

"Pause," added Andrew, solemnly, "before it's too late!"

"I ain't sure but it's too late now."

"You don't say so!"

"The fact is," explained the Judge, nervously, "I've paid a deposit down for the woman."

Mr. Moss rolled his eyes upward.

"Unhappy man! you are undone!" he declared.

The dignified gentleman from Yalobusha county wiped away the perspiration which had strangely beaded his forehead.

"Perhaps she is all right," he suggested, feebly.

"Don't you b'lieve it, sah! I've been to New York twice, an' what I don't know about the place ain't worth knowin'. Same as to the girls heah, too. The bureau man says all the girls come there to get husbands. Now, what can you expect of people who marry that way? It ain't right; it's iniquitous; but all the girls heah do it, an' they're all swindlers. Back out o' your bargain, Judge!"

"He can't," hoarsely remarked the taciturn man who was dog-bitten.

"I'm afraid that's so," Hackland agreed. "I gave her money to bind the bargain, and the engagement was made in the presence of witnesses. She said she could trust me, for the laws of New York were framed so that a man could be arrested anywhere, brought back heah, made to marry the woman he had jilted, or go to prison for twenty years."

"Nothin' is too bad for this place; I presume that's the law."

"I wish I were back in Yalobusha county," the Judge admitted, nervously.

"You had better be in your coffin than married to a matrimonial bureau woman."

This statement was most lugubriously made, and though it sprung from pure sympathy, had the effect of scaring out of the Judge what little courage he possessed. It left him about paralyzed with fright.

CHAPTER VI.

OLD FOES MEET.

WHEN Basement Bert reached the cobbler shop he found only Ches Day present. The cobbler who employed them had seized upon a lull in business to go off and enjoy himself.

"You're jest in time, Bert," Ches declared.

"Fer what?"

"I've got leave ter shut up the shop at dark, an' I've got a job fer both on us. You know what the Richelieu Rifle Club is, don't yer?"

"I've heerd of it."

"They give an entertainment this evenin'. Their grand annual shooting-match comes off a little later, an' this entertainment is ter get folks interested in them an' make the shoot a success. Lot's o' milit'ry men is invited."

"We ain't sojers."

"No, but I've got a chance fer you an' me ter be waiters."

"I ain't a bear-carrier."

"Nor me, an' that ain't w'ot we're ter do. General errand-boys, was w'ot the feller who hired us called it. We're ter be on hand, all dressed up in uniforms which the Rifle Club furnish, an' ef anybody wants us ter run an errand, why, there we be, ready ter do it. Mebbe nobody will want us, an' we sh'a'n't need ter do a thing, but we git our pay jest the same. Jiminy! but you ought ter see the uniforms, with the bright buttons!"

"I ain't much mashed on jim-cracks an' furbelows," Bert sturdily replied, "but gold, silver an' paper-money I never was teacht ter despise, an' ef you've duly vestigated this scheme, Ches, why, I'm with you."

Thus it was that, at the proper hour, the two boys presented themselves at the rooms of the Richelieu Rifle Club, and were duly appareled in the uniforms which had so excited the wonder and admiration of Bert's friend. They had been selected because they were considered about the right size to fit the uniforms, and *vice versa*; and even practical Bert could not despise their appearance when so neatly clothed.

The quarters of the Rifle Club consisted of one large and two small rooms, and a hall which they used or rented to others, as occasion demanded and permitted. On this evening there were to be stage-exercises by selected talent, but of brief order, as the main point was to have opportunity favorably to impress the invited guests.

The latter began to arrive, and, after being received by a committee, were given seats in the hall.

Bert stood near the reception committee, by order, ready to make himself useful, and heard a bewildering announcement of military titles as generals, colonels, majors and minor lights arrived.

In none of these was he greatly interested for some time, but he finally caught sight of one man whose appearance attracted and held his attention. He was a man of fifty years, with bushy side-whiskers and a figure of military mold; but it was not this that interested Bert—it was a familiarity about the gentleman which he could not account for or understand.

The gentleman advanced toward the committee under the escort of a ponderous German rifleman.

"Captain Mark Warland!" was the announcement.

Warland! Basement Bert knew in a moment why the captain's face was so familiar; he bore as strong a resemblance to Meredith Warland as was possible when their respective ages were considered.

"Father an' son, I'll bet good money!" thought the cobbler. "In some way I must find out where the fam'ly lives; I may want ter see Meredith some time."

The captain said a few formal things in a very dignified way, and then was escorted to a seat. Just then Bert was sent on his first errand. When he returned, there was a lull in the arrivals, indicating that nearly all had reached the place. Warland was still in his seat.

Bert's gaze wandered over the crowd for a while, and then again became fixed. Above a tall hat rose a huge white feather, and under the hat was a woman. Bert whistled softly.

"Pearl Montessor!" he muttered.

The discovery was striking. Pearl was accused of decoying Meredith's sister away, to make a sharper of her, and if Bert's theory as to Captain Warland was correct, the woman and Adrea's father were within ten yards of each other.

"Wal, now, this is peculiar," the cobbler commented, "an' it wouldn't s'prise me ef there was a small cyclone here, yet. Who's with Pearl?"

He looked, but failed to recognize any of them. Two couples were together; flashy, overdressed people, who were no great ornament to the company. Having already seen something of Pearl's audacity, Bert suspected she had insisted upon taking risks which her partners in crime would not venture upon.

Matters remained unchanged until the brief stage performance was over. Then the guests bestirred themselves, and, though some went home, the majority went to the Rifle Club's apartments. Bert kept watch of Captain Warland, and finally made a bold push and approached him.

"Beg pardon, sir," he began, "but may I speak ter you?"

"Certainly, my boy," was the affable reply.

"Do you know one Meredith Warland?"

"I ought to; he is my son."

"He lives—"

Bert paused, and the old gentleman graciously observed that Meredith lived with him, and gave the street and number. The boy flashed another look at Pearl Montessor. She was talking vivaciously with her friends, and he felt sure that, if she and the captain knew each other by sight, neither had yet discovered the other.

"I b'lieve," continued Bert, lowering his voice, "that you hev a daughter named Adrea—"

"What?"

Captain Warland flung out the word like a shot, and his expression of calm dignity gave place to an angry glare. It seemed as if he were trying to transfix the boy with that glare, and the former began to realize that he had made some mistake.

"I kin help you ter find her—"

"Who asked you to help?"

"Nobody, sir; but I thought—"

"You had no business to think. Don't you do it again; it will bring you into trouble. And don't you again refer to the young woman you have mentioned. She's no daughter of mine."

"Beg yer pardon, then. I meant no harm, but as she is Meredith's sister, I s'posed she's your daughter and you would want ter find her."

"I don't know how you have gained knowledge of me and my affairs, but this I will say: Adrea Warland has chosen her own path and

will have to walk it; I have cast her off forever. If you have more to say, go to those who want to hear it."

Before Bert could say more the captain left him, his emphatic manner showing that he meant all he had said.

"Wal, now, I guess I ain't in it!" the cobbler soliloquized. "That bold warrior will bite my ears off ef I say any more on that subjick, an' my lips is sealed, as 'twere. I was goin' ter tell him that Pearl, dear girl, was here, but I never punch a cross bear with a stick twice. Our warrior kin sail on—Hullo!"

The boy had mechanically watched Warland as he moved away, and thus became witness to a striking scene.

The workings of chance sometimes seem like the malevolent design of some secret power. It was so when Warland and Pearl, moving around among the other guests who went to make up the crowd, neared each other and finally came face to face.

Discovery was simultaneous, and each stopped as short as if from the effects of a blow. Face to face they looked one another in the eyes, while Basement Bert read much in their expressions. Surprise was on both hands, but the captain betrayed anger and disgust.

For several seconds the scrutiny was kept up; then Warland turned and walked away without a word or sign of recognition.

Bert expected to see the woman's face light up with vindictive triumph, but, instead, she looked after the captain very soberly.

"She's afraid of him!" the cobbler decided.

For awhile Pearl hesitated; then she suddenly turned and sought her companions of the evening. They spoke together earnestly, and Pearl, at least, was excited.

She made frequent gestures toward Warland, who had walked into the deserted hall, and, standing at the rear, was looking down over the rows of seats.

Pearl was good-looking, and could act the lady when she tried, but she belonged to the "hammer-and-tongs" class of women who are very emphatic in their ways when not under restraint, and Bert read her well now as she made her sweeping, belligerent gestures.

Finally, she and both the men moved toward the hall, where Warland still stood with his face turned away, in deep thought.

"Mischief afoot!" Bert exclaimed. "What're they goin' ter do ter the cap'n? Guess I'll take a hand in the game!"

CHAPTER VII.

THE SLUNG-SHOT.

CONVINCED that the woman and her allies intended harm to Captain Warland, Basement Bert moved quickly toward the hall, but in a way as quiet as that of the plotters.

He had not misjudged Pearl. There was good reason why she should hold Mark Warland in doubt, and, meeting him there, she conceived the idea that he was present as her enemy. She would have left the club-rooms without delay, but believed that she was watched, and that her departure would be opposed.

In all of these conclusions she was wholly wrong, but guilt had conjured up phantom fears.

Fearing arrest she had determined to make a bold stroke for liberty, and thought the first thing to be done was to dispose of Warland. With the leader of the opposition out of the way, escape might be possible.

The schemers were ahead of Basement Bert, and he saw them bearing down upon Warland cautiously. They might have made more noise, for he was in deep thought. One of Pearl's allies produced a small slung-shot from his pocket and cut down the intervening distance between him and his coveted victim.

Up went his hand, and he swung the missile to deal the blow.

It was the chance for which Basement Bert had waited, and he gave an agile leap forward. A sharp push spoiled the ruffian's aim, but was too late to check the blow. Down came the slung-shot, but, failing to find its victim, slipped from its wielder's hand and struck the floor with force which sent a hollow reverberation through the almost empty hall.

Captain Warland gave a great start, turned quickly and saw the group before him. Bert quietly picked up the slung-shot.

"You kin thank me," he remarked, "that your head is all in one piece."

The soldier looked at the missile, and further words were unnecessary to explain the situation.

"So you would add murder to your other crimes!" he exclaimed, addressing Pearl.

She was silent, and he added:

"It does not surprise me in the least."

"We did not try to kill you."

"This slung-shot would deal no love-tap."

"We knew you would not let us get out of here, and had to strike in self-defense. Even a dumb brute will do that."

"You cannot claim to be dumb, though I admit that you are a brute; but let that pass. Prevent you from leaving here? Great heavens! I care not how soon you go; the sooner, the better."

"Do you deny that I am trapped, here?"

"Woman, I told you long ago that I never wanted to see your face again. Such was my position then; it has not changed. Keep your distance and you are all right—I even forgive this attempt on my life—but if you come near me, you need not expect me to act a passive part."

Pearl looked puzzled and uncertain.

"I repeat that we did not want to harm you, but merely to render you insensible for a few moments so we could slip quietly away. We thought you had laid a snare to arrest me. Since you have not, let us be friends. But," she continued, her usual audacity breaking forth, "you do not ask after Adrea."

Warland's face grew hard.

"I care not for Adrea."

"She is your daughter."

"She is not! I disown her!"

"Hear the dear man talk!" cried Pearl, mockingly. "There was a time when Adrea and I filled all his thoughts, but there has been a change. Strange, is it not? Once he asked me to be his wife."

"Sneer on, female fiend!" Warland retorted.

"Every word you say is lost, for I know who and what you are. Your present companions I know not. They smile wisely at your words. Well, what of it? I de y nothing. I met you under such circumstances that I supposed you to be a respectable woman. I know, now, that you are a thief, swindler, and ally of men of like pattern. When I learned the truth, I threw you over. You had gained hold upon the mind of my daughter, and, despite all I could say, she preferred to stick by you and your desperate fortunes, rather than by her family. I used superhuman efforts, almost, to save her. I failed! She went with you. You complain that I do not ask after her. I care not. Adrea has chosen her way; let her follow it."

The speaker's manner showed the utmost contempt for Pearl, but when he tried to assume indifference in regard to his daughter, it was not wholly a success.

"Your son is not so rigid," Pearl returned, after studying the captain's face a while.

"My son is his own master."

"He is searching for Adrea."

"What is that to me?"

"It may be much. Captain Warland, you have wealth and influence. If you will use them in my favor, and have all complaints against me withdrawn, I will use my influence to have Adrea return to you."

"Once and for all, madam, I tell you I am not interested in her fortunes. I moved earth, if not heaven, to keep her among respectable people, but when she left me and went with an adventuress, I was done with her. For her and the adventuress I have no good-will to waste!"

With a haughty air Warland walked away, and Pearl flushed deeply with anger.

"The old fool!" she sibilated; "if positions were reversed, I'd make him sweat well for this!"

"Did you really know him once?"

"Did I? I played the respectable dodge, and actually got engaged to marry him—an old trick of mine—but he gave me the grand shake."

"Why didn't you sue him for breach of contract?"

"Dear boy, old Mark had learned too much about me; he would have juggled me had I cut up rusty. But where is the boy who foiled our last game?"

They looked around for Basement Bert, but he had been wise enough to retreat to the cover of the curtains, near the door, where he could listen but not be seen. He felt almost certain that Pearl had not recognized him, and wished to give her no chance to study his face.

"Never mind the boy; he's a servant here, and not of account. Let's get away. Warland has professed indifference, but how do we know he is sincere? He may set the police on us. You and Alf would run your heads into a lion's mouth without thought."

"Wrong! The instinct of self-preservation

alone led to the attempted assault on old Mark. You know it, for I told you so then. What was I to think, except that he would prevent our leaving here? I did not suppose he really had thrown his daughter down. But you are right about leaving; the sooner we are on the Elevated, and bound home, the better. I'll go and get ready at once."

She hastened away, while her companions talked in a subdued, irritable manner.

Pearl's usual recklessness had led her to attend the evening gathering, though Holmes and Draper would not come; and the men whom she had pressed into service as her escorts were sorry they had run the risk.

"Nobody ever followed Minnie's company without getting into trouble," declared one.

"So Pearl has got another name?" thought Bert. "What of it? Prob'ly she's had a dozen. But I'm goin' ter take the fair lady's trail, an' as I don't want ter desert out-an'-out, I'll try a bit o' strategy."

He found one of the managers, and remarked: "Can I see a lady home what is goin' now, or will I be needed here?"

"We didn't hire you to see any one home, but, of course, it makes no great difference. Go along, but make sure that you're well paid by her."

Chuckling over the success of his plan, Bert secured his jacket, put it on over his uniform, and left the place. Soon after, Pearl came out, alone, and walked away.

"Bold as a Bengawl tiger," the cobbler muttered. "Guess she don't need any protector, but my contrack was ter 'see her home.' I'll do it!"

Pearl took an Elevated Railroad train, and the trailer rode in the car behind hers. The journey was but short, and when she left the station she had only a block to go. The hour was not yet late, and when she finally turned and ascended the stoop of a house, he saw that a light was burning within.

From the first he had acted with all possible caution, and he now held back and acted innocent. He was as anxious to avoid being seen as he was to know her headquarters.

Just as the key clicked in the lock under her touch, some one passed Bert quickly, ran lightly up the steps and pressed after Pearl with a resolute air.

"Great snakes!" Bert muttered.

He had recognized Meredith Warland, and knew that another crisis was at hand.

Pearl crossed the threshold and turned unsuspectingly to lock the door after her. Then she, too, saw Meredith, and was not slow to recognize him. She was quick-witted, and made an effort promptly to close the door in his face, but he introduced his foot, preventing this, and then crowded in after her.

Determined not to be left out of any interesting scene, Basement Bert ran up the steps and took place behind Warland.

"You ruffian!" cried Pearl, with the headlong temper peculiar to women who have no restraining element of honor in their make-up, "what do you mean?"

"I mean that I've hived you," Meredith swiftly replied.

"Get out of here, or I'll have you arrested!"

"Do it, if you dare."

"I'll call help, and have you done up."

"Call whomsoever you please."

"Oh! I wish I were a man, and I'd break your jaw for you!"

It was not an elegant speech, and it had no element of originality; both Meredith and Bert had heard other high-tempered women talk that way before.

"Never mind about my jaw," returned Warland, coolly. "You know why I am here. You and I are no friends, and we need not waste soft words on each other. I am here now by merest chance; I saw you on the Elevated and followed you, feeling confident that, at last, I was in a fair way to track you to your lair. I have done it, and now I want you to produce Adrea!"

CHAPTER VIII.

ANDREW'S TERRIBLE CALAMITY.

THE two genial gentlemen from the South, Mr. Andrew Moss and Judge Hackland, found each other such agreeable company that the latter decided to accept the former's invitation to visit him at his quarters on Greenwich avenue.

Sigers Long preferred to return home. The Judge was getting a good deal of pleasure out of his visit to New York; Mr. Long was getting none. If the mad-dog had not bitten Long, neither he nor his friend ever would have seen the great city; but, while the bite of the dog led

the Judge on to pleasure, it gave Sigers a good deal of trouble.

He was being treated for his injuries, but the remedy, or his fears, or something else, made him ill nearly all the time, and occasionally he saw dogs and monkeys which existed only in his imagination.

Not being in a mood to visit any one, he went to his boarding-house, while Hackland and Moss went to Greenwich avenue.

"Here's my room," Andrew announced, "an' I must say it's a right smart place. Hot an' cold watah, gas, an' a fiah when needed. Three clean towels on the bracket, too. That would be considered prodigal in Horry county, South Cah'lina."

"I reckon I should like to live in New York," observed Hackland.

"I reckon you wouldn't, when you learned it well. I was heah ten days last yeah, an' I l'arned about as much about the village as the natives know. I'll show you some things—"

Andrew had gone to his valise and opened it.

"Hallo! what's this?" he demanded. "A package in heah which I didn't put heah, an' all tied up as nice as you please. Wonder what 'tis?"

"I reckon some young lady has sent you a present."

"Judge, you are a sensible man in the main, but I hate to see your thoughts run so much on the females. The ladies in Mississippi may be worthy of it, but I tell you the New York girls are vipahs. Do you understand? Vipahs, sah; vipahs!"

Mr. Moss had taken the neatly-tied package to the table, and stood with his pocket-knife suspended above the stringing as he made this assertion. As he was not contradicted he cut the strings, and unrolled several thicknesses of paper.

"By Ginerel Jackson! they wrapped this up right smart!" he declared. "Brown papah enough heah to last a store a week. Hullo!"

"Hullo!"

Hackland echoed the exclamation, springing up as he did so, and both stood staring blankly, and in amazement, at what was revealed inside the wrappers.

On the table lay a package of oblong slips of paper, neatly held together with bands, and the glory of green and gold, and of well-known figures and signs, dazzled the eyes of both beholders.

"Money!" gasped Moss.

"Money!" echoed the Judge.

"A ten-dollah bill on each side, an'— Why, there must be a hundred of them."

"A thousand dollahs!" exclaimed the Judge.

"Suahly, you don't mean to tell me it isn't yoahs?"

"Do you s'pose I'd leave all that cash where any o' these New Yorkers could get at it? Judge, you don't know them. Why, they'd steal the boots off yoah feet if they got a chance!"

"Have they stolen from you?"

"Wal, only that wife o' mine, but—"

"Then don't condemn people who, instead of stealing from you, have given you that big pile of greenbacks. Open it, man; open it! There may be a note there."

Andrew obeyed the direction, and handled over the bright, crisp bank-notes so strangely put in his keeping. There were one hundred and forty-seven in all, and the total amount, ranging from one to twenty-dollar bills, counted up one thousand and ninety-one dollars. Not a word of writing was to be found.

"Be I dreamin'?" finally asked Moss, abruptly.

"No dream about this."

"But I nevah seen the money befoah, sah."

"Can it be a present?"

Andrew shook his head.

"Are there othah boarders heah?"

"Only me, an' I only hiah the room."

"Then there can be no mistake."

"But there is."

"Call yoah landlady."

Andrew hesitated. He was as honest as men average, perhaps, and would not knowingly wrong any one, but this money had been placed in his possession without any effort on his part, and he was human enough to wish to hold on to it, if possible. If he called the landlady and made the facts known she would be a barrier to his uninterrupted enjoyment of the money, and enjoy it he intended to do, unless some one proved a better right to it. He was of the opinion that a man who would not accept such a flood of good fortune would be a stupid man.

He meditated, and then put the money out of sight and rung the bell. Kate Cooney appeared. Now, Kate had been troubled over the visit of

Pearl Montessor to the house, and had feared severe reproof from her mistress. Such being the case she had determined not to mention the adventures or her work, and this resolution colored her replies to Andrew.

"Have I had company?" Moss asked.

"Have you? Well, you's ought ter know."

"I mean, when I was away."

"Oh! Guess not; ain't seen anybody."

"Nobody been in my room, eh?"

"Ain't seen anybody," was the unblushing reply.

"That's all."

Kate retreated, and Andrew looked solemnly at the gentleman from Yalobusha county.

"What do you think *now*?"

"Of course, somebody *has* been heah."

"The servant don't know of it."

"No."

The Judge spoke wonderingly, and pulled at his big gray beard as if to extract ideas from his temple of understanding.

"Is this a regular New York style?" he added.

"I reckon."

Andrew did not "reckon" anything of the kind, but was eager to hold on to that money.

"There are a good many rich men in this city," pursued Hackland, "and I often read in the papers about their doing a good deal of good with their money. I suppose a New York millionaire spends moah money in a day than a Yalobusha county man does in a week. Now, it wouldn't surprise me if some rich man had given you this, just out of pure good-will."

Mr. Moss brightened up wonderfully. No other theory could have been more agreeable to him.

"I reckon that's it," he agreed.

"But how did he get in heah?"

"Oh! there are a hundred ways. We needn't discuss that. The main point is that I've got the money, an' I sha'n't go back to Horry county so very poor, after all. This will make up for what I give my wife to git red of her, though not for what she prodigally wasted. But some othah millionaire may make me anothah present."

Andrew's spirits rose even higher, and he attempted to dance a jig, but long service on his farm had stiffened his joints until they were not fit for such work.

"You feel right smart," observed the Judge, "but I can't join you. My mind ain't that way."

"What's the mattah?"

"You have alarmed me about the matrimonial bureaus, and I almost wish I hadn't engaged a wife," the Judge confessed.

"Oh! I reckon you'll come out all right. Yes, yes; I reckon you will."

Andrew spoke mechanically, for his mind was on his money, not on Hackland's matrimonial venture. To keep that money now became an absorbing passion, and he was afraid the Judge would go and spread the secret. This must be prevented, but how? He had but little faith in promises, having sampled them to his sorrow in the past, and wished to bind Hackland to him more closely. But how could he do it?

Suddenly he had the idea.

"Judge," he remarked, abruptly, "I'm no hog, an' I want you to share in my good luck. Heah are two ten-dollah notes; take them as a present from me."

"Well, now, sah, that's a right smart gift!" the Judge declared. "But I have no claim on the money, sah."

"Never mind, sah; take it. That's my wish."

Hackland refused no longer. If money was so plentiful in New York that strangers were made recipients of it to such an extent, why shouldn't he share in the shower? He put the money in his pocket, and after a short conversation, left the man from Horry county, and started back to learn how Mrs. Sigers Long was progressing.

Again Andrew took out the money and looked at it. He gloated over it as he never had gloated over the dollars gained by hard work in South Carolina; but his losses at the hands of his faithless wife had made wounds which only money could heal. Over a thousand dollars at one stroke! The healing process was begun.

Anon, he had an idea. Being an observing man, he had noticed that his big, soft hat was not the style affected in New York, and he had cast many admiring glances at the tall, black, shining head-gear which was so popular with well-dressed men. He determined to have a tall hat at once.

Taking two of the ten-dollar bills he went out, found a hat store on Sixth avenue and entered. The many hats in the upright cases, and the

long rows of boxes in the rear of the store, dazzled him, but he made known his wishes to the clerk, selected the coveted article, and handed over one of the bills.

It was taken to the cashier's desk, but the clerk soon returned.

"Beg pardon for keeping you waiting, sir, but we are short of change, and shall have to send a boy out for small bills. Your own will remain at the desk, and we will delay you but a moment."

"That's all right, sah," returned Andrew.

The boy went out, but returned in less than a minute. At his heels came a big, blue-coated officer. The clerk nodded to Mr. Moss, and the policeman walked up to him.

"You kin go wid me, cully!" he remarked, nonchalantly.

"Eh? What's that?"

"You're my prisoner!"

"Gineral Jackson! What for?"

"Shovin' the queer."

"Doin' what?"

"Oh, come, now! don't do the innocent dodge. Jest take your medicine an' not kick, fer you's ain't in it; all gents who handles de 'stuff' is bound ter git throwed by it sooner or later. Your time's come. March along, cully!"

He put a big hand on Andrew's arm and contracted the fingers until the bone of that good Horry county arm seemed to be in danger.

"Let me go!" Moss cried. "I ain't done anything. I don't understand a word you say. What does he mean?"

This inquiry was made of the clerk, who condescended to reply in English:

"Your bill was counterfeit."

"Counterfeit!" gasped Andrew.

"Dead counterfeit."

The Southerner was dumfounded. His vision of wealth faded away, and he felt poorer by a thousand dollars. He tried to rally, however, and sadly observed:

"I'll make it all right. Here's a good bill. Give me that one back, an'—"

The policeman uttered an indignant snort.

"Wot yer given us?" he demanded. "Guess you's think we're a lot o' greenies here, but we ain't built dat way. Like ter get de stuff back an' sneak out of it, wouldn't ye? I'll have you's know no man kin shove de queer on my beat an' then crawl out. Come on, cully."

"You ain't goin' ter arrest me?"

"I've done it already."

"But I'll give this gentleman a good bill—"

"De bloke is an old hand!" quoth the blue-coat, with a wise shake of his head. "He's made up like an old farmer, and acts de innocent well, but it won't go. Come 'long before I snap you out ave yer shoes!"

Andrew was in a profuse perspiration, but that and all his pleas for mercy were alike unavailing. The cashier had at once discovered the bill to be counterfeit, and the employees of the store were just as sure as the policeman that they had nabbed a veteran handler of bogus money.

The unhappy man was taken away, and at once escorted to Police Headquarters. On the way he had time to meditate, but was not sagacious enough to solve the mystery. That the money was spurious seemed certain, but how or why it had been placed in his valise he did not know.

When they arrived at Mulberry street the grim front of the legal building struck further dread to his heart, and the two big officers on duty inside the door served to complete his downfall.

That he ever again would be a free man he did not dare to expect; he left hope behind when he passed the grim entrance; and he was marched along to meet the chief inspector in a state bordering on collapse. The star of happiness shone not for Horry county.

CHAPTER IX.

A STRUGGLE OF MIND AND MUSCLE.

BASEMENT BERT saw that Pearl was almost choking with anger, and, disregarding the odds against her, she made an effort to drive Meredith Warland out of the house by banging the door against him. Her impotent fury made Bert smile, but no one heeded him; the principal actors in the scene were too much in earnest to take notice of him.

"You struggle in vain," observed Meredith, coldly. "You may as well lead the way to Adrea."

"She is not here, and I don't know where she is. She has left me," Pearl asserted.

"You speak falsely, and I know it."

"How?"

"Were she once clear of you she would go

home. The power that keeps her oscillating between happiness and ruin is the fiendish fancy you have gained over her. Pearl Montessor—or Minnie Beaumont, or whatever you call yourself—you may as well bow to this fact. Your day is over, and you must give Adrea up. Will you do it at once, quietly, or do you covet arrest for abducting her?"

"I say she is not here!"

Their voices unconsciously had been raised to a high pitch, and at this moment the parlor door opened and a young woman came out with a wondering expression on her face.

"What is the matter, Pearl? What—?"

She stopped short at sight of Meredith, and her manner became confused and frightened.

"It is I, Adrea," he remarked, gravely.

"Why couldn't you stay where you belonged?" demanded Pearl, bitterly.

"I—I didn't know who was here," faltered Adrea.

"Well, you've found out."

"Adrea," cried Warland, "I want to talk with you. I've been searching a long time, and now, thank fortune, I see you again. Let me talk with you, sister; let me tell you how deeply I feel your desertion, and want you back again."

"Go in there!"

Pearl was in a sullen rage. She would have ejected Meredith at once if she had been able; as she was not, she realized that the easiest way was to grant the interview. The open door was a source of danger, for if a patrolman came along, he might desire to know the meaning of the scene in the hall.

Warland turned to Bert Lincoln, who had begun to fear that he would be left out of the new deal, and remarked:

"You will keep me company."

"All right, gineral; I'd sorter like a seat nigh by, I admit," Bert quickly agreed.

Pearl closed the door with a bang, and all went to the parlor. The woman's face bore the same look of sullen rage, and it was plain that she only awaited a chance to show her claws decisively.

The parlor had no other occupant, and the quartette sat down.

"Adrea," began Meredith, at once, "I am here to ask you to go home with me."

"I can't go," was the ready reply.

"Have you no regard for your brother?"

"For you I have all possible regard, for you have been a good brother to me; but you know how I feel about father. He asked Pearl to marry him, and then backed out of the engagement. I believe a woman's heart should not be trifled with thus—"

"You know his reasons; you know what he learned about—about Miss Montessor."

"I know what he charged against her, but I will not believe it. I have known her well for months, and feel sure she is a true and noble woman."

Pearl blinked solemnly on hearing this high praise, and looked very demure, but could not avoid a sly glance of triumph at Warland.

"Be that as it may, is not your place with your relatives—"

"I will not return to Captain Warland."

"I do not ask that. Go with me, and I will make you a home independent of every one else. You shall have rooms, where no one will intrude upon you, and I will pay all your expenses. Listen and heed what I say! I am your brother, and no one has your well-being more sincerely at heart. Will you go with me?"

"No," was the unhesitating reply.

"You've got your answer; how do you like it?" demanded Pearl, rudely.

"I am addressing my sister, madam."

"You are in my house, and you needn't put on lugs. Give me no more airs, or I'll biff you in the face!"

"Adrea," exclaimed Meredith, "do you hear this coarse, unwomanly language? Can you hear it, and still believe in her?"

"You irritate Pearl."

"And does not she irritate me? Is it nothing that she has lured my only sister away? Adrea, look back to our childhood; remember our dead mother, who cared for us both so tenderly; remember the happy days of old. Adrea, you and I are our mother's only children. Must we be separated forever?"

The appeal was earnestly made, and it affected Adrea. She was headstrong, but not evil. The fears of her friends that she already had taken lessons in evil-doing of Pearl were unfounded, and she still remained ignorant of that woman's evil life; but Pearl saw that, with her ability, confidence, and quickness of mind, she would make a rare companion in wrong-doing if

once brought over. The adventuress was instilling the poison slowly, and Adrea was, as yet, neither thief, blackmailer nor decoy.

Adrea wavered; there was a tremor of her lips, and a dimness of her eyes.

"Those words sound much like Captain Warland," put in Pearl, craftily.

"Sister, give attention to me only. I repeat, you need not return to our father; I will make you a home where you will be your own mistress."

Meredith was ignoring the adventuress, but she was not to be put down.

"Just the offer the captain made to you, Adrea. Strange! The fine Italian hand of the senior Warland is visible in this."

"It is false!" cried Meredith, angrily. "I would not be so base as to deceive my own sister. Do not think that every one is made off the same pattern as yourself."

"You need not abuse Pearl," remonstrated Adrea, with spirit.

"What about her charges against me?"

"They may be true."

"Do you believe all she says, and nothing I say?"

"I have faith in her. As for the Warland family, I cannot say as much."

Basement Bert, listening attentively, but keeping discreet silence, shook his head. He saw that Meredith had a big undertaking on his hands. Adrea was not only under Pearl's influence, but she had a temper of her own, and was too stubborn to be reasoned with.

Meredith did not give up. He redoubled his efforts, and would soon have convinced his sister had her evil genius been out of the way, but at the proper moment the latter always managed to introduce a few sly words which undid all he had gained.

At last he plainly asked Adrea if she would go with him. She looked at Pearl, received a glance in reply, and then answered in the negative.

"Is this your final decision, Adrea?"

"Yes."

"Then, since I cannot save you with your consent, I will save you anyhow!"

Speaking these words sternly, he turned upon the adventuress and added:

"It is for you to show the way here. Inform Adrea that she can no longer remain under your roof, or I will call a policeman and have you arrested!"

Pearl's eye flashed, but it was Adrea who found words to answer first:

"Dare to do this and I will never speak to you again!"

"It is for your sake, my sister."

"Bosh! So might a rattlesnake say when he gave his envenomed sting, if he had your gift of speech. Meredith, will you forfeit all my regard for you? Do you want me to think of you as Captain Warland has compelled me to think of him?"

"Heaven knows my heart is heavy, but you must be saved. I repeat it, if you do not go with me willingly, I shall call a policeman. I will see that your evil genius does no more harm. Which shall it be? The hour has come when a decision must be made. Shall I call a policeman?"

"If you do," Pearl broke forth, fiercely, "it will be the worse for you!"

"I shall do it."

Meredith spoke with inexorable firmness and moved toward the door, but Pearl sprang in front of him, drew a revolver and leveled it upon him.

"Stop!" she cried, passionately. "If you advance another step it will be your death-warrant!"

CHAPTER X.

THE MAN WITH THE REVOLVER.

THERE was an ominous pause. Meredith Warland had made the mistake of supposing he could carry on this scene about as he pleased, but the presented revolver taught him a new lesson. The weapon did not tremble in Pearl's grasp, and he could not doubt that she would keep her threat and fire if he tried to pass.

Presently he turned to Adrea.

"Is it thus you and your friends proceed?" he asked.

The girl was somewhat agitated, but her allegiance did not waver.

"What can you expect?" she returned. "You have abused and threatened Pearl—she would be more than human if she did not resent it. All this is due to your own work."

Warland turned his back upon his sister.

"Boy," he said, addressing Bert Lincoln, "I

have scored a failure here, and will excuse you from further attendance. You can go."

Pearl laughed unmusically.

"Don't you wish you could?" she cried. "If I look as green as you seem to think me, I am to be pitied. You would like to send this kid out to call a policeman, wouldn't you? Even if that was not the plot, he could not go; I've seen him before, and have a grudge to settle with him. The kid stays here!"

Basement Bert heard this decision with disgust which he took pains not to betray.

"Your hospitality is very agreeable to a poor feller like me," he answered, "but I feel a bit out o' place in so much grandeur. Be'n' customed ter sleepin' in boxes on the piers, I hev; an' this is gorgeous. Much obleeged, mum, an' I accept yer invitation."

"Fool! don't act the innocent. I believe you're even more dangerous than Warland."

"Dang'rous?"

"So I said."

"Land o' love! you're 'way off—"

"I believe you are a sneaking spy. Young America is precocious in the city of New York, and every bit as dangerous as a viper who has grown gray in meddling with other folks. You shut your jaw, and let me hear no more of your gab!"

Pearl's low nature broke forth every little while, and words fell from her lips very characteristic of her class, but Adrea remained as blind as ever.

Meredith had been gazing fixedly at the adventuress. It was particularly aggravating to be checked just at the moment when success seemed at hand, and he did not intend to submit. Revolver or no revolver, he was going to try and leave the house at once, to summon an officer.

Just as he arrived at this decision, the door unexpectedly opened and Holmes and Draper entered. It was a mutual surprise, and the two crooks stopped short near the threshold. Pearl's face brightened; triumph now appeared certain. Meredith could not find similar satisfaction in the situation.

"What does this mean?" Holmes demanded.

"That fellow is here; he forced his way in," Pearl explained, quickly. "Now he threatens to take Adrea away by force—the dear child does not want to go—and to have me arrested."

"So that's his game. Well, I think Mr. Warland will not do anything of the kind. When he set himself up as his sister's persecutor he forfeited all claim to the regard of honest people—"

"Have done with hypocrisy!" Meredith hotly interrupted. "I will not listen to such absurd talk. I demand free passage from this room!"

He moved forward resolutely, whereupon Holmes caught the revolver from Pearl's hand with the intention of turning it upon their common enemy, but this change gave the latter just the chance he wanted; he sprang forward and grappled with Norman, preventing the use of the weapon. He was strong and skillful, and for a moment there seemed to be some hope for him, but Draper leaped upon his back and bore him to the floor.

Basement Bert was eager to do something in the cause, and he made for the door, but Pearl again seized the revolver and brought it to bear upon the cobbler.

"Stop, or I shoot!" she cried.

"You old tiger-cat!" exclaimed Bert, in a passion of anger and disappointment, "ef you don't hustle out o' the way, I'll live ter see you in Sing Sing."

"Rubbish!"

"That's all right, ol' lady, but you won't be so cranky when you git there."

By this time Meredith was overpowered, and Holmes called for cords with which to bind him. Despite all that could be, and was, said and done, both he and Bert were soon reduced to a state of helplessness.

Some one then thought of Adrea, and she was found lying on the floor in a swoon; the scene had been too much for her endurance.

"So much the better," Draper commented. "We have gone too far for half-way measures; the prisoners must be taken care of; and the girl would only be an obstacle in our way. Before she recovers we must have our bargain signed and sealed; these cattle must be out of sight."

He kicked Bert in the ribs, as if he thought those ribs were made for that purpose.

"It's an infernal fix!" Holmes growled. "The whole matter is reckless enough for even you and Pearl, but I don't see how we were to do anything else. Take Adrea into the next room."

Draper and Pearl obeyed this direction, and the three conspirators then talked together for some time. When a decision was arrived at, Pearl went out of the room. About twenty minutes passed, and then she returned and announced:

"All is ready!"

"Now comes the pinch," remarked Holmes, nervously. "It is risky business—"

"We've done greater deeds," interrupted Draper.

"True, and a good deal can be done in this blessed city of ours; but there is a limit to all things. We are going at a rapid pace, and are bound to bring up with a jerk some time. The moment may be close at hand, but we have no time to moralize."

He turned to the prisoners and added:

"You are going away in a hack, but I warn you that any effort to give an alarm will be dangerous—more, it will be fatal. We are where we must make or break. Carry them out!"

Meredith and Bert were conveyed to the hack, the street being clear enough at that late hour so that no one saw their movements. This done, Holmes and Draper piled in with them, and the vehicle rolled away toward the West Side.

Basement Bert did not like captivity, and was inclined to risk everything and cry out for help, but he felt that Warland was his leader and should be allowed the right to govern their course, as far as they had power over it.

Really, silence was their only hope, for Holmes sat with drawn revolver, and he was a desperate man.

A short ride took them to the North River, where there was another delay, but they were finally taken out of the hack and conveyed to a sail-boat which lay by the pier. Again the luck of the kidnappers stood by them, and no policeman or watchman was at hand to interfere with their scheme.

The boat was shoved out from the pier until it was in the grasp of the wind, when it moved away briskly.

Nothing could more clearly demonstrate the power of Norman Holmes, and the fact of his wide acquaintance with crooks of all grades, than his ability always to find some man to do his evil bidding. The boatman was serving him as loyally as the hackman.

Basement Bert did not like the policy of silence which Warland was pursuing. At the best they could no more than be treated to a shot, and it seemed about as bad to be borne away from New York as to be severely used within the city limits.

When near the middle of the river a canvas was thrown over the prisoners' heads, evidently to prevent their taking notice of their course; but Bert could hear the waters of the noble stream splashing against the bow, and knew their course was northward.

He could not estimate the lapse of time, however, and when they finally touched on the Jersey shore he could not tell where they were. Across the stream many lights were glittering, but they were north of the point where he was well acquainted, and the sight was not one of familiarity.

The prisoners were landed and conducted up the bank. At first Bert could see no sign of life, and trees and bushes seemed to have the place to themselves; but after going a few yards they came upon a dark, rambling old building which looked gloomy and deserted.

Holmes began to hammer on the door, but it was long before he succeeded in arousing any one. Finally a hoarse, complaining voice sounded from an upper window:

"What's the matter down thar? Go away, or I'll put a dose o' buckshot inter you!"

"Hold on, Buck! It is not tramps, but friends. Don't you know us?"

"Divil a know! Be off, before I shoot!"

"You fool! you know us, or ought to. Come down and open the door; we are your employers."

Evidently the man was convinced, for, though still grumbling audibly, he withdrew, descended and opened the door. The prisoners were taken inside, through a tumble-down passage, and up-stairs to another room. Buck was ordered to strike a light, and, after a good deal of trouble, had a lantern going. He held it up and looked at the new-comers in a peculiar way.

"You're still half asleep, Buck," Holmes complained. "Wake up, and get a move on you. We've brought these critters for you to take care of."

"Drat 'em!" Buck muttered.

"They are to stay here as prisoners, and you

will sharply watch them, and allow them no freedom on any condition. They must remain bound. See?"

"Yes, yes; I'll brain 'em!"

"Nonsense! Don't be absurd. Of course you will exercise unusual caution. We've always told you not to let any outsider enter; the order now becomes more imperative. You have an easy berth, Buck, but it'll be swept away from you like summer dew if you let them escape."

"Never you fear," croaked Buck; "they don't go out unless it's over my dead body."

"Good! Now come aside and receive directions."

Buck obeyed, and Holmes talked to him earnestly for some time. Once only his voice rose so Basement Bert could hear it. "Why are you so stupid?" he demanded; and Buck did seem to be in a peculiar condition.

When all was settled, Holmes and Draper went out, and the prisoners were left alone with the guard. They had been dumped down in one corner, where all was dark, but Buck took the lantern, came over near them, and looked long and earnestly.

"Humph! humph!" he finally growled. "Pretty birds; very pretty birds! Slick as grease! Pretty birds!"

"Mr. Buck, you seem to have a lonely residence here," remarked Warland.

"Humph! humph!"

"Life in New York is much gayer."

"Pretty birds! pretty birds!"

"How would you like to be a man of leisure, with plenty of money in your pocket—"

Buck turned abruptly, left them, set the lantern in its proper place, crouched down and began muttering to himself.

"Is he crazy?" Meredith asked, in a low voice.

"Drunk!" Bert tersely decided.

"Do you think so?"

"Cert. Didn't yer notice that his eyes are fixed in his head like glass balls?"

"Yes, but it may be an indication of more serious trouble."

"Don't know w'ot is worse than an ugly drunk, an' that's w'ot is eatin' Buck. Even his frien's noticed how stupid he was, as they called it."

"Then he may go to sleep and give us a show."

"Dunno; he don't seem ter incline that way. Way off his uppers, ef I ain't mistook. Ef you only could buy him up ter let us go!"

"I'll try it."

Meredith was about to address the guard again when that person suddenly made a new move. From his pocket he took a revolver and began to polish it on his sleeve—an operation which would not have been so very striking had it not been accompanied with glaring glances at the prisoners; glances which expressed far more than could be described, but which gave them feelings of great uneasiness.

The idea was dawning upon them that Buck was a dangerous man.

Meredith decided to defer his appeal to the guard's cupidity, and both he and Bert watched the polishing process with a species of fascination.

Finally the guard abruptly stopped, glared at them and muttered:

"Pretty birds! pretty birds! Just fit ter kill!"

Getting upon his hands and knees he crept toward them, his gaze flashing from one to the other, a wild light in his eyes. And in his hand he carried the revolver, while the keenest fears became active in their minds.

CHAPTER XI.

TROUBLE BY THE BUSHEL.

JUDGE REESE HACKLAND rose the next day and breakfasted at his boarding house, but he was not in his customary high spirits. The Judge and Mr. Sigers Long occupied a peculiar position in the house. The landlady was of Southern birth, and she kept a standing advertisement in newspapers beyond the Potomac, stating that "transients" from the South would be accommodated.

It was that advertisement which had led Hackland and Long to choose the place, but they had hardly been in their element. Their country garments, and especially Long's colored, collarless shirt, had been out of keeping with the dress of others at the table.

Despite this, the Judge was not abashed, and his predilection for conversation was not curtailed. He talked freely, and mostly to the young ladies at the table. The gentlemen were

not disposed to meet him half-way, but the young ladies did all of that, and had much sport at his expense, without his knowing it.

This morning he was not so talkative as usual, and comments to that effect failed to rouse him.

The truth was, Mr. Andrew Moss had alarmed the Judge, and the latter regretted his haste in securing a wife at the matrimonial bureau. Gladly would he have backed out, but he had already paid over a sum "to bind the bargain," and then, at that late hour in the proceedings, the manager of the bureau, one Norman Holmes—who, by the way, claimed the prefix of "Rev.," but did not use it in business—had given him an insight into what he said was the law on such points, which made the Judge's position more precarious. He believed that it meant ruin to try and evade the contract—ruin and long imprisonment.

He was now in a panic, and regretted ever having left Yalobusha county.

Leaving the house, after breakfast, he was walking along in a thoughtful mood when some one called to him; he saw a cab stopping near him, and at the window was the handsome face of the woman he had promised to marry.

"Come here!" she directed.

The Judge's heart seemed to be traveling toward his knees, but he obeyed because he did not dare to refuse.

"Get in!" she added.

Again he obeyed, and for the same reason.

"You did not call around last night, as you promised," proceeded the lady.

"No—o!" faintly agreed the Judge.

"Is this the way you keep your word?"

"I—I couldn't help it!" he faltered. "My friend, he was awful bad, last night. The hydrophobia cure is working powerfully, and I didn't dare go to bed at all for feah he could bite me. It was an awful night. He saw a right smart heap of dogs and monkeys—all imaginary, you understand—an' was broken up a good bit. I reckoned I wouldn't be fit to go out to-day, but heah I am. I—I hope you are not offended at me."

There was an evil gleam in the woman's bold black eyes which showed she saw the speaker's perturbation and exulted in it.

"Dear love!" she returned, "how can I blame you? What should I do if that man should bite you, and rob me of my future husband? Oh! you will be careful and not get bitten, won't you?"

She beamed upon him most affectionately, while he perspired like a laborer under his own Southern sun.

"This woman is awfully in earnest!" he thought, in despair.

Then he had a bright idea.

"Oh! I've been bitten by dogs myself, a good many times."

"Are you afraid you'll have hydrophobia?"

"It's liable to break out any time."

"Is your life insured?"

"Is—is— Eh? What?"

"Of course if it isn't insured you will see to it at once. If you should run mad I could care for you—or hire it done—with a good deal more devotion if I knew you had made ample provision for your widow. It would take away the pang of your death very much, you know."

Deeper grew the Judge's horror. Andrew Moss had told him that New York girls were heartless; was not this striking proof of the fact? He sat speechless until the gentle, cooing, but, withal, mischievous voice at his elbow added:

"A woman makes a great sacrifice when she marries—"

"I should say so, in New York!" exclaimed the Judge, indignation giving him brief spirit. "She may be as poor as Job's turkey, but she demands that her husband shall rig her out in silks and diamonds; and she wants a flat and a servant; and she won't work; and she nevah will agree to marry until the man can prove he has money. What does she offah in return? Just herself, and no moah. Yes; a woman does make a great sacrifice when she marries. Bah!"

"My love, many women are that way, but our match was one of unselfish devotion."

The Judge was about to retort that she had not only inquired solicitously about his bank-account, but had demanded a sum down "to bind the bargain." Prudence, however, checked the innocent old farmer, and he said nothing of the kind.

The ride continued for some time, and the lady, the mischievous twinkle still in her eyes, made love to him desperately. He perspired and edged away as far as he could get, but she followed him up and, unknown to him, had unlimited amusement at his expense.

He was in misery all through the drive, eager to get away, but dared not suggest it until she saw fit to part with him. When she did this it was near the northeast corner of Central Park, but he willingly would have been left in Canada, in order to escape.

He looked after the retreating vehicle with a face lengthened to a surprising degree, and wound up with a deep sigh.

"Why did I evah leave Yalobusha county?" he finally groaned, in the bitterness of grief. "I was respected and happy there, and my neighbors called me 'Judge,' because they thought I was wise. Wise! Why, a feeble-minded person might well envy me now. Why did I ever leave Yalobusha county? The dog that bit Sigers Long hurt me worse than Sigers, and I almost wish Sigers would bite me. If I could get him to bite that woman it would be a blessed deed!"

For awhile he gave himself up to grief, but finally took his bearings, made a few inquiries, and wandered over to the One Hundred and Sixteenth street station of the Elevated Road. This line bore him in due time to Fourteenth street, and he went to Greenwich avenue to see Andrew Moss.

"He isn't in," answered the landlady, who opened the door after he rung the bell.

"I'm sorry for that."

"I'm afraid something has happened to him."

"You don't say so!"

"He went out last night as if to be gone only a few minutes, but has not come back."

The Judge looked at the speaker in blank dread.

"I fear he has fallen afoul of sharpers and got done up," added the lady.

That was all the information Mr. Hackland could get, but it was enough to drive away all his remaining calmness. He left the house feeling positive that, in the chase after his wife, Andrew had come to grief, and it was a warning of what was in store for others who tampered with matrimonial bureaus.

"Ruined!" groaned the Judge, tragically. "I am a lost man. The othah woman will hunt me down."

Oppressed with this idea, he walked on toward his boarding-house, but paused on the way to make a purchase.

In paying for it he chanced to draw out the two new ten-dollar bills he had received from Andrew Moss. He was not accustomed to carry such a large sum loose in his pockets, but had neglected to put these notes away.

The tradesman scrutinized the crisp, new bill somewhat closely, but received it without remonstrance or comment, and gave the change.

Then Mr. Hackland walked home.

His friend of the hoarse voice, otherwise Sigers Long, was in unusually good spirits, for he had not seen any imaginary dogs or monkeys for some time; and they were talking briskly when a servant appeared at the door.

"Dhere's a perleeceman down-stairs phat wants ter see you's," she announced.

"A what?" cried the Judge, with a start.

"A perleeceman. I guess," added the servant, with a grin, and without any notion she was getting near the truth, "he wants ter arrest yez!"

CHAPTER XII.

THE MAD GUARD.

A MORE startling sight than that presented to the view of Meredith Warland and Basement Bert it would be hard to find. If they had doubted at the first, they did so no longer; it was plain that Buck was mad from the effects of whisky, and his muttered words, and the revolver he carried, bespoke an intention to fix the prisoners so they would not need any watching.

Neither spoke; they did not dare to risk their voices and run the risk of stirring the man up to additional ferocity. What little power of movement was left them could not be used to save themselves, and, perfectly helpless, they sat and watched the creeping madman with a species of fascination.

Half-way across the floor he abruptly paused, sat down, and began to polish the revolver again on his sleeve. This he kept up for several minutes, as if it were a matter of the greatest importance, but once more he paused, looked at the prisoners, and muttered:

"Pretty birds! pretty birds! Just fit to kill!"

Meredith determined to break the painful silence.

"My friend," he began, "this is a cozy place you have here."

"What's that ter you?"

"We are your guests, you know."

"Hal you come here an' rob me of my sleep; you make me watch, an' watch, an' watch. Devils! you care nothin' fer the poor laborin' man. You make him work, work, work!"

"Do you want an easy life? Do you want money? You shall have both by going with me to my home in New York."

"Lies, lies! All lies!"

"I promise it faithfully."

Buck held up the revolver, balancing it neatly on his thumb.

"The only good Injun is a dead Injun, an' you will never be honest until you're dead. I'm goin' ter shoot you. See?"

"Nonsense! What would you gain thereby?"

"A chance to sleep."

"You can sleep now."

"You say so, but the boss— Hal he would do me up."

"He need never know it; we will not tell him."

The guard flourished the revolver wildly.

"You think you're wonderful smart," he cried, angrily, "but you don't know enough ter eat hay. Take me fer a fool? You'd like ter hev me sink into slumber like a log an' give you a chance ter escape, but it won't work. The boss put you here, an' here you stay. A dead Injun is a good Injun; a dead prisoner is easy kept. Ha! I will kill you now!"

Again he flopped over on his hands and knees and began to crawl toward them, inch by inch. His face had a wild expression, but the fixed, glassy appearance of his eyes did not change.

"Scat, you varmint!" Basement Bert impulsively exclaimed. "Don't be crawlin' around here like a pesky wildcat. Ef you knowed how homely ye was you wouldn't put yerself on exhibition, but would go off som'ers an' den up fer the season."

These candid remarks produced no effect, but, when Buck had advanced just far enough, he presented the revolver and aimed at Warland's breast.

"You must die!" he repeated. "I will count up ter three, an' fire when I git thar. Ready?"

Warland's face changed color. He was not an adventurer hardened by years of wild life, and it was a terrible thing to be slain by this whisky-crazed wretch.

"One! Two!—"

The young man closed his eyes.

"Three!"

Click!

The hammer fell, but no report followed. Meredith opened his eyes. Buck was looking at the revolver, and a snarl followed.

"Not loaded! Never mind; I have cartridges, an' I'll kill 'em yet. Pretty birds! pretty birds! Just fit ter kill!"

Buck went to a drawer near at hand and took out half a dozen cartridges. These he arranged in a row on the floor, and then resumed his old polishing operations, the object of which was not clear to any one else, even if it was to him. The revolver was in good condition, and it was only a freak which led to this outward burnishing.

"Pard," observed Bert, "this is powerful tryin' ter the nerves."

"You are right," Warland agreed.

"Don't s'pose we kin hope fer interruption?"

"I fear not. This building stands in a wild spot, remote from other habitations, and is doubtless supposed to be deserted. In all probability our enemies have taken possession without leave or license. Perhaps search would show stolen goods concealed here. No; I do not think any one will come to our aid."

"Be your hands tight?"

"So tight that they're very painful."

"This is a pretty cold deal."

"I'm sorry that you have got into trouble by following my fortunes—"

"Don't mention it, boss; we're in the same swim, an' we'll reach the shore or sink with a commotion that'll make the bubbles sing merrily. But we ain't gone yet! Never say die! Our crazy frien' may take on a new notion, an' not do us up, after all. Never say die!"

Bert tried to be cheerful under disadvantages, but did not lose caution. Both he and Meredith spoke in low tones, to avoid being heard by Buck. That person finally ceased polishing the revolver and slipped the cartridges into place with slow and thoughtful movements. His manner was so sluggish that they began to hope he would forget his purpose and go to sleep, but, suddenly, he raised the weapon, pointed it their way and fired without warning.

The report in the small, close room was alarmingly loud, and Bert had a vague sensation as if

he had been shot to his death, but when the first panic had passed it became evident that both he and Warland had escaped injury.

Buck was laughing loudly and pointing toward or near them, and a side glance showed the boy that the bullet had penetrated the wall at a point directly between them. Considering how near each other they were, and how uncertain the aim of the drunken man was, their escape bordered on the remarkable.

The guard was stirred out of his ugly indolence, and began to dance and shout, and flourish the revolver. Now and then he raised the hammer and took aim at the prisoners, who every moment expected the final act; but he wound up the dance by losing his balance and falling in a heap.

After that he lay quiet for some time.

"Reg'lar nightmare!" commented Bert, with a sigh.

"It is particularly painful when we consider that all our peril rises from such a cause. Even Norman Holmes's hatred is not so bad as the whims of a drunken brute."

"Never mind, boss; our turn will come bime-by."

"How can it?"

"Dunno yet."

"Where will morning find us?"

"In the blessed city o' New York, I hope, though you'd better not buy any ticket fer there until we're surer o' goin'."

Buck bestirred himself, hunted up a rope and once more confronted his charges.

"See that beam up overhead?" he asked.

"Lucky the room never was finished off, fer now I'm goin' ter hang you. Capital place fer capital punishment, ain't it? Ha! ha! Yes; I'll swing you up by the neck from the beam, an' be sure o' findin' you in the mornin'!"

His idea pleased him so much that he laughed long and loud, and, more troubled than at any other stage of affairs, Warland made a fresh attempt to touch his cupidity. Buck was asked to name his own price for unclosing the doors and letting them out, but he paid no attention to the proposal.

He proceeded with his own scheme, but not as at first announced. He tied the prisoners together, and then passed the loose end of the rope over the beam and secured it.

This prevented them from lying down, but did not bring the dreaded pressure on their necks.

Buck produced a bottle and imbibed copiously; more than that, he poured down the liquor as if it was only water.

His companions were worried as to the consequences. If the stuff fired his blood he would get some new scheme of recklessness which might not end so tamely as those in the past.

Next he filled a pipe and, lying on his couch of old blankets, smoked in stupid silence. Now and then he cast a glance toward the captives, and his eyes would light up with an ugly gleam, as if he still blamed them for the fact that he had been aroused from rest.

Time passed.

"His eyes are shet," remarked Bert, in a whisper. "Oh! jiminy, don't I wish he would go ter sleep!"

"What good would it do? We are helpless."

"Dunno erbout that! I can't only tell as ter that till I hev a good, smart tussle with these ropes. Might possibly worm out on 'em, though they seem ter fit like the paper on the wall."

"Buck smokes slower. Is he really going to sleep?"

"Looks that way. Don't speak nor sneeze!"

Two pairs of anxious eyes were bent upon the guard. His smoking grew irregular; it ceased. The pipe dropped from his mouth. He seemed to sleep, but finally roused slowly and, after much labor, gained his feet and walked toward the water. Hestaggered remarkably; the last drink had been too much for him. He was now unconscious of his charges.

He reached the water, but, just then, lost his balance and fell heavily to the floor. Then he pillowed his head on his arm, muttered a little, and went on in sound sleep.

A strong odor greeted Bert's nostrils. He looked toward the blankets; they had been set on fire from the pipe, and were smoking and dwindling away.

"Great Caesar!" the boy cried; "we shall all be burnt up!"

CHAPTER XIII.

SMOKE AND FLAMES.

"That does look bad!"

Meredith Warland made the confession with his gaze fixed upon the eating tongue of fire, and Basement Bert added:

"Ef that thing ain't put out we'll git gnawed up."

"How can it be put out?"

"That's what I want ter know."

Thus far the fire did not amount to much. It was still in the incipient stage, and there was more smoke and odor than flame, but it was clear that it would gain steadily and soon break out into strong blaze; and when once the blankets were in the grasp of the fire it would be only a few moments when the dry, loosely-placed boards would catch. With the blaze once under way the old building would burn furiously.

"Can't we wake up Buck?" Bert added.

"I think it would be impossible; he is in a drunken slumber, and if as far gone as he seems to be, the voices of twenty men would fall unavailingly upon his ears."

Bert looked at the blankets again. The fire was eating steadily, and threatened to make a sudden increase at any moment.

"We must git out o' here, or we sha'n't be in it with the birds in the spring. Squirm, pard, an' try ter get out o' yer bonds!"

The Boy Cobbler set the example, but Warland knew it would be useless for him to struggle. The ropes could not be broken, and they were drawn so tightly over his wrists that the flesh had puffed up on either side. Escape from that terrible grasp was impossible.

At various times Bert had entertained the idea that he could get free if allowed chance to "squirm," as he expressed it; he now did his best. Each movement produced pain, and it seemed as if his hands were being torn to pieces, but he would not give up.

The air became laden with smoke, which made breathing difficult.

"Darn that old Norm Holmes and his gang!" panted the boy; "he's got us inter a little the ugliest scrape I ever heerd tell of, an' I wouldn't give him a chromo ef they was sellin' at five cents a cord; but there's somethin' else I'm anxious ter give the measly varmint. Oh! wouldn't I jest like ter dance a jig on his nibs's ribs!"

It took a good while to say this, and the words were given utterance on the installment plan, but all the while he was busy.

"The blaze increases!" commented Warland, uneasily.

"I see."

"If we were not tied to that beam we could roll over and try to extinguish the blaze that way."

"Never say die, general! I believe— Say! is the p'izon thing a go, or ain't it?"

"Does the rope give?"

"That, or my bones. Dunno which!"

"The fire— Ha!"

The blaze sunk down like a crouching foe, and then leaped up in a hungry flame which told a startling story.

Already, too, the boards under the blankets had grown black and red, an ominous mixture, and were ready to spring into a blaze on a little encouragement.

"Shout!" Warland ordered. "Small as the hope is, we may be able to make some one hear."

"I kin do better!" gasped Bert.

He gave one more twist, and one of his hands was free. Down into his pocket went that hand; it came up holding a knife. This he opened quickly and began to slash away at the ropes. The blade was keen, and both he and Meredith were soon free.

"Scud!" Bert cried.

"No; we'll save the building."

The speaker flung open the stove, and, with the aid of a broom, tossed the blankets into the stove. When the door was closed on them the greatest danger was past, and a few pailfuls of water on the floor drowned out the trouble there.

Their peril was over, and they opened the windows to let the smoke drift out.

"Whoop!" Bert cried, "I reckon we are in this deal, ourselves. No trip ter the future land fer us jest now—nor fer Buck. That measly skunk ought ter go, though. Here's the revolver he skeered us silly with, an' ef we wa'n't candidates fer the Law an' Order League, we would pay him off in his own coin. Hey, Bucksey?"

He rubbed the revolver on the guard's arm in a ludicrous imitation of Buck's recent burnishing methods, and the victors felt so exhilarated that they laughed long and loud without any clear idea of what they were laughing at. It was enough that their lives were saved.

Meredith tried to arouse the guard, but failed.

"Try the perlecceman racket," Bert suggested.

"What is that?"

"Take the broom an' hit him a few smart clips on the bottom o' his shoes. That'll start a tingle through him, an' he'll git a move on."

"Never mind; I don't know as we care whether he wakes up or sleeps his drunk off naturally. Humanity demands that we make sure he is not left here to perish, so we will dash a little more water on the boards and then leave him. I don't think we want to pass the night here."

"Not fer Hannah!"

Preparations for departure were made, and they left the building. The next thing was to get their bearings, but this was no easy matter. No village was to be seen on the Jersey shore, and the prospect of a long tramp lay before them unless they could find a boat. They believed, too, that they were above Spuyten Duyvil, and might not be much better off if on the New York side.

They descended to the water's edge, but failed to find any boat, and decided that they would have to take the objectionable tramp. This they began, but had gone less than half a mile when a voice arose from the river singing "Nancy Lee" in a strong base voice.

It was a chance not to be missed; they hailed the boatman, he rowed near the bank, a bargain was made and they were soon on their way down the river with the strong arms of the stranger, and the current, as the motive power.

By the time they were landed at the foot of West Forty-second street they were weary and sleepy, and the night was fast drawing to a close, but Warland did not intend to let any time go to waste, and Bert was bound to follow his leader, cost what it might.

As soon as possible they went to the house where they had been kidnapped, but found it dark and silent. This was to be expected at that hour, but Meredith had an uneasy feeling that Holmes and his gang again had taken flight.

To solve the matter he went to Police Headquarters, laid the case before the ruling powers, and requested help. Detectives were detailed, and the party returned to Holmes's house. Repeated ringing of the bell failed to produce any results, and, as Warland had suspected, the place was found deserted.

The latter had grown desperate, and he formally engaged the officers and asked that the crooks be run down and Adrea rescued; but action was deferred until another day dawned.

Basement Bert went home, retired and slept soundly until late in the morning.

He was wondering if he would be allowed to take any more time away from the cobbler shop, but chance favored him. The proprietor of the shop was called away to Philadelphia to attend the ninetieth birthday of a rich relative, and Bert and Ches had their time to themselves for at least forty-eight hours. The young friends went for a walk, and Bert was busy telling the story of the adventure for the second time when Ches was surprised to see his companion start abruptly away from his side.

"Hi! there; hold up!"

Bert addressed the order to a passing hackman, and the latter was so impressed with the cobbler's business air that, scenting a job, he drew up by the curbstone.

"What's wanted?" he asked.

"I want the address o' them sharks!"

"Eh? What sharks?"

"Them you carted round last night."

"Don't know w'ot yer mean."

"Oh, come now; don't play innocent. You driv me an' Meredith over ter the North River, an' we was shipped up-stream in a sail-boat. Think I've forgot that?"

The driver changed color, and looked alarmed.

"You're mistaken in yer man," he returned.

"Mistaken nothin'! A man who wears red mutton-chop whiskers is as easy ter spot as a three-legged dog. You didn't know me, I see, but I'm the kid you carried. Now, where's Holmes?"

"I say you're mistaken—"

"I'll leave it to a copper. Here, Ches; call that patrolman over yender—"

"Hold up!" was the hasty interruption.

"Oh! has yer mem'ry got a move on?"

"I was that driver, but I didn't do nothin' wrong."

"Oh! didn't yer?"

"No; an' ef there was harm done, I wa'n't ter blame. My 'fare' hired me, an' I drove the party over; that's all I know about it."

"Do you generally carry a man an' a boy round tied up hip an' thigh?"

"They tol' me you was bank-burglars, who was ter be extradited ter Jersey."

"Mister, nobody kin doubt yer word; it's as

reasonable an' likely as 'tis fer a dog ter hev a tail. Pris'ners are always extradited, too, in jest that style—why, cert. But we'll let that pass, an' never a word will I say ag'inst you ef you'll whisper where Holmes an' Pearl be."

"I don't know—"

"Oh, gammon! don't weary me. Shall Ches call that grim-lookin' gavus?"

"Climb up here!" returned the driver, angrily, "an' I'll take you where I took them after we got back from the river. Ef there's been wrong done, I wa'n't ter blame, an' I'll make a clean breast of it. I'll show ye yer new quarters, an' then you kin do the rest; but bear this in mind: I'm a poor man with a wife an' nine children, an' 'twould be mean ter 'throw me down.'"

"There'll be nary a throw, Jehu, ef you'll do the proper caper. Big game is w'ot I'm after, an' the small fishes kin go. Drive ahead, mister!"

CHAPTER XIV.

A CRISIS COMES.

BERT had climbed up beside the driver, and Ches Day entered the vehicle and spread himself out on the cushions with an air of great satisfaction.

"Mypard is the boss, an' we're 'out o' sight,'" he soliloquized. "I never expected ter ride in sech style, but Bert has cheek enough ter hire the Governor's private dog-cart, an' I ain't goin' ter git left in the shuffle. Jiminy! the 'riscrats don't git all the plums in life!"

Basement Bert was not so well satisfied. He had not any great amount of faith in the driver, and felt that he ought to be wary to avoid new dangers. He watched closely to see that they did not dodge into any stable by the way, where he would be helpless.

The driver, however, soon gave indications of a mind ill at ease.

"I wouldn't 'a' thought ill o' that crowd," he remarked.

"Their manners is gentle," grimly agreed Bert.

"One o' the gals seemed high-toned an' nice."

"Did you ketch her name?"

"'Twas somethin' like Adrian. I thought she seemed cast down an' out o' spirits, but she went along willin'ly."

"How many did you take away?"

"Four."

"All ter one place?"

"Yes."

The driver was agreeable and genial to an extreme, but Bert was not deceived; he knew that the man was acting thus simply because he was frightened. Probably he was not the worst man in the world, but he was not so honest that he would object to earning a fee where one of the conditions was that he should remain silent. But greater than all other considerations was his desire to keep out of the clutches of the police.

In accordance with Bert's instructions the driver stopped one block away from where he claimed to have left the gang. The cobbler detective was at a loss how to test his Jehu's good faith, but decided to go on alone, leaving Ches Day with the vehicle, and secretly view the house.

Perhaps he would get sight of one of the conspirators at the window.

He communicated this plan to Ches, who at first demurred against being left behind when there was chance for an adventure, but when Bert assured him there would be none, he acquiesced.

"Ef you don't show up in due time, I'll come ter the rescue," he lightly observed, as Bert walked away.

"All right," was the careless reply, for the latter had no intention of taking any risks.

He walked slowly as he approached the house, and kept his face to the front, but his eyes were turned to one side and he was losing nothing.

"Guess cabby's on the square," he mused. "There's the red curtains, an' the blind off at one winder, jest as he said. More'n chance about that, I do b'lieve. But I don't see nobody at the winders, nevertheless. Come, Pearl, ol' lady; ef you're there, jest show up, an' oblige a feller that's woundedly interested in a damosel about your statoore. Hello!"

He was almost in front of the stoop, and heedless of what was on the sidewalk, when a man crossed so closely in front of him that he had to pause, and ascended the steps.

"Great Cicero!"

Bert muttered the words half-audibly, for the man was no stranger. He recognized Captain Mark Warland.

"Now, then, what's he doin' here?"

Warland had rung the bell, and, not glancing at Bert, was composedly waiting for an answer, and great was the observer's wonder. It was too great to be kept under control, and he ran up the steps.

"Say, mister!" he cried, "take me along, will yer?"

The captain looked down and recognized the boy at once.

"Most certainly," he responded, heartily. "I have been anxious to see and reward you ever since you did me such great service at the Richelieu reception, but you got away on that occasion so suddenly that I had no chance to do my duty. Come in, and when my business here is over—"

Bert was waiting eagerly to speak on more important subjects, but the door opened before he could do so. A servant girl stood before them.

"I am the landlord," remarked Warland.

"Don't you know me?"

"Sure, sor," was the answer; "though Oi didn't fer a minute. Oi'm more used ter seein' your agint. Come in, sor."

She stepped back, and the captain obeyed the last injunction. Bert was anxious to have conversation with Warland, and ask if he knew Adrea was in the house, but no opportunity was vouchsafed him.

"Dhe mistress is up-stairs in de private parlor," the servant continued. "Come right up, an' Oi'll show you's the way."

They went, and Bert followed at the captain's heels. He knew not what would come of all this, but was bound to see it out.

The girl would have knocked at the front-room door, but her mistress chanced to open it just then.

"The landlord, mum," the girl explained, and went away.

They were in the presence of a small, sharp-featured woman, whose appearance was anything but amiable. Bert thought her disposition was not likely to improve when Warland brusquely stated:

"I have come on business, madam. Sit down and hear me." He waved his hand toward a chair, took a seat himself, and proceeded. "I want this house, madam!"

"Want the house?" she echoed.

"Yes; but I do not want you as a tenant. I am very much dissatisfied with the way matters are going here, and I want you to pack up and move out on the first of next month."

The woman's eyes glittered angrily.

"What's the meaning of this, sir?"

"You shall know in plain words. The character of this house is not what it should be. My agent leased it to you under the impression that you were a woman who would keep up its reputation, but I find you have failed to do it. Some time ago unpleasant rumors came to me, and friends began to ask me if I had started a poker-club. Men known to be great gamblers have been seen coming and going here almost nightly, and I find that neighbors regard it as a regular gambling-house—which I judge it is. I won't have this; you must move out, and all your lodgers with you. Not a soul of them shall remain!"

The captain spoke with military directness and emphasis. At first the landlady's temper was all at the front, but he talked long enough so that she calmed down enough to try diplomacy.

"Sure, this is all a mistake, sir."

"Oh! is it?"

"Yes. I am an honest woman, and have only the best of lodgers—"

"Letting you tell it. Never mind arguing; the long and short of it is, you must go, and all your lodgers with you."

The drapery of the door which led to the next room was suddenly pushed aside.

"We shan't go until we get ready!" cried a defiant voice.

And there stood Pearl Montessor, glaring up on them, and only just curbing the fierce passion within her.

Basement Bert beheld her without any great amount of emotion, but to Captain Warland it was a complete surprise.

He rose and, for a moment, gazed at the woman in disgusted silence, but sarcasm soon broke forth.

"Here," he asserted, pointing to her, "is proof of all I have alleged."

"Proof of what?" cried Pearl.

"That people are allowed in this house who ought to be in Sing Sing."

"You scoundrel!" hissed the adventuress, "be ware how you abuse me. There was a time when you made love to me desperately—you, a gray-

"Old foggy with a son as old as I am! Do you want all the world to know it? What would the fastidious Warland set say if I could bring a breach-of-promise suit against you?"

The captain shrugged his shoulders coolly. "You dare not. Had you been willing to risk arrest on counter-charges, you would have brought suit long ago. I do not fear you. However, I am not here to bandy words with you; my business is with my tenant. Madam," to the landlady, "you and all your people must move out, bag and baggage."

"I will not go!" cried Pearl, almost hysterically.

"We will see."
"You broke your promise to me after inducing me to say I would marry you," Warland made a deprecating gesture as he remembered how Pearl had angled for him; "and now you follow me and will not allow me to rest in any place in New York. Am I to be hounded by you forever?"

"Idle talk! You are free to stay in any house except one owned by me. That you shall not do."

"Go slow!" advised Pearl, lowering her evil voice. "I hold Adrea in the hollow of my hand!"

The captain's face grew sad. Time was impressing him strongly, and he was not so ready to say that he cared nothing for his rebellious daughter.

"The unfortunate girl knows her father's home always is open to her," he answered.

"She will not seek it; her sympathies are with me, for she knows I am a wronged woman."

At this point, Bert Lincoln, who stood near the hall door, heard the rustle of female garments outside, and, looking, saw Adrea passing, apparently unconscious of what was transpiring within. Unnoticed by any of his companions he slipped out, overtook Adrea and stopped her.

"Take a listen at the door," he advised. "There's that bein' said there which may strike you forcible."

The light was dim; she did not recognize him; and she regarded him with curiosity.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Come here an' see!"
Somewhat bewildered by his mysterious manner and the request, Adrea allowed herself to be led to the half-open door. One look there was enough to show her all she cared to see. She was turning away quickly, but Bert checked her.

"Listen!" he advised, earnestly. "Neither on 'em knows you're here. Ain't it a good time ter find how both really stand toward you?"

Adrea stayed.
"You may as well abandon your persecution of me," Pearl was saying. "I will not bear everything, and I've been hounded lately until my endurance is about exhausted. Hereafter, I shall use Adrea as a shield."

"How?" the captain asked.
"Every blow aimed at me shall recoil upon her. You affect indifference, but I know you care as much for her as you ever did. You have the sickly sentimentality of men in high life. Bah! if she were my child, I'd tell her to go to—Well, anywhere she chose!"

"Yet, you claim to be her friend!"
"She is useful to me now; I will make her more useful. When you try to make me suffer, she shall suffer instead. Captain, I will remain in this house!"

"You will not!" Warland declared.

"None of your tools can put me out."

"Then I'll do it myself."

"You? Why, you old idiot, if you dared touch me this would be your reception!"

With a quick motion she drew a handsome, small, but keen knife, and flourished it before his face.

CHAPTER XV.

FOUND IN PRISON.

"JUDGE" HACKLAND gazed in alarm at the servant who announced that a policeman wished to see him. True, there had been nothing in his recent interview in the carriage to indicate that he need fear such prompt measures, but, knowing how miserable he had been during the drive, he had a vivid presentiment that his "bureau" lady-love had seen his dying faith in her, suspected that he intended to leave New York, and intended to take measures to prevent it.

He turned to Sigers Long, and shook his head.

"Farewell!" he said, tragically. "I feel that I am going to my doom, and I can't be treated

for it as you've been for hydrophobia. No vaccination will calm an angry woman's rage. I envy you those bites, Sigers, for they can be cured. When you get back to Yalobusha county, tell them I died with fortitude!"

The Judge's trembling voice and tearful eyes belied the last insinuation, but hoarse-voiced Mr. Long hastened to reassure him as much as possible, and both went down to learn the worst. To the Judge the handsome, trim policeman looked as big as a church and as dangerous as a dynamite bomb.

"Judge Hackland?" the officer inquired.

"Ye-es, sah," faltered that gentleman.

"I come from a man claiming to be your friend, one Andrew Moss. He is in jail!"

"You don't say so! What for?"

"Shoving the queer."

"Doing what?"

"Putting out bogus long-green."

"What in the world is that?"

"Passing counterfeit money," impatiently explained the blue-coated guardian of the peace.

Hackland's face lighted up with joy.

"Thank Heaven!" he cried.

"Why, I thought you were his friend."

"I am."

"And yet you are glad he is arrested?"

"You don't understand— But never mind!"

The Judge was very happy to know that Moss had not been incarcerated on account of Mrs. Moss, for that would foretell his own doom, he thought; and he did not give due consideration to the other charge.

"He was arrested last night," the officer explained. "The morning papers have an account of it, but not under his true name; he only gave that this morning. He wants to see you."

"I'll go down at once. Poor fellow! I'm sorry for him, and know he ain't guilty. He's a Southern gentleman, sah!"

The policeman did not see fit to comment on this point, and, having done his errand, went away. The Judge was soon on his way to visit Moss. Singularly enough, he did not consider that there was danger for himself. It was clear that the money Andrew had found in the valise so strangely was the cause of all his trouble, and Hackland remembered that two of the bank-notes had been given him, but when, a little before, he passed one of them on the tradesman, he had done it so mechanically that the fact was not now recalled.

He found Mr. Moss in the place of incarceration, weary, hollow-eyed and sad-faced; but the visitor was greeted with true Southern politeness.

"I am glad to see you, sah, even though I welcome you in a grim an' frownin' Bastille. Ah! sah, little did I think when I was spendin' the happy days of my life in Horry county that I ever would come ter this. I know now how a man feels doomed ter perpetual confinement. Forgive my emotion, sah, but my soul is shaken within me!"

Andrew wiped the tears from his eyes and leaned his head upon the wall.

"Cheer up, sah; you'll soon be out," returned the Judge, encouragingly.

"If we were in South Cah'lina, or Mississippi, where law is justice, it would be all right; but this is New York. That means a good deal, an' it wouldn't surprise me ef I never ag'in heard the birds sing, see the sun shine, or watched the cotton grow in the sunny South. Forgive this emotion, sah, for my heart is tempest-tossed, an' it stan's a right smart chance o' bein' broken."

"How do you account for all this, sah?"

"My wife!"

The Judge started and changed color.

"Your wife?"

"I reckon."

"But how!—what?—who?—"

"Somebody put that money in my valise. Why? Ter ruin me. Who? Who should it be, but my wife? I don't mean she really did it, herself, but 'twas her or her allies. They sneaked into the house some way an' put the stuff there, knowin' I would try ter pass it an' come ter grief. It worked, too; I was ruined by the counterfeit queer—they call money 'the queer,' in New York, though why, I don't know."

This alleged fact did not long occupy their time, for Andrew had something of more importance to say. He had many friends in Horry county who could testify to his uprightness, and he wanted all such testimony, as well as money, to conduct his defense. He gave Hackland due directions in the case.

"There is one thing more," he added. "I've told the whole truth heah, but I can see they don't believe me. Now, I want a good, impar-

tial detective engaged who will take the trail of my wife an' hunt her down. I have been searched heah, but one thing escaped notice, an' I was not fool enough ter mention it. I have a picture of my wife hid in the linin' o' my hat, an' I want you ter take it ter the detective. Heah it is, sah!"

He had removed the picture while speaking, and now passed it over to the Judge. The latter looked, and then almost dropped it in his surprise and consternation.

"This woman, your wife?" he cried.

"Yes, sah."

"Why, she's the same one I've agreed to marry!"

A wild light appeared in the speaker's eyes, and he believed his hair was standing on end. There was a period of silence during which the two victims gazed at each other blankly; then Andrew shook his head sadly.

"My poah friend, you are a ruined man!"

"I am! I feel it; I know it! Oh! oh!" groaned Mr. Hackland. "Why did I evah leave Yalobusha county?"

"Strange! strange! So she is still workin' the matrimonial bureau game, an' she's caught you!"

"Yes; and she will be the death of me. I reckon I shall wind up right heah with you. But, see heah! If she's your wife, how can she prosecute me for breach of promise?"

"My friend, I've been in New York 'most a month, altogether, an' I know all about the place. I've nevah asked about divorces, but I don't doubt that she's got one before now, an' is a free woman. I tell you this is an awful country, up heah."

"What shall I do?"

"Well, first, I reckon you had better help me!" replied Andrew, frankly. "You can put the woman off for awhile— But, say: don't you pass them two counterfeit bills I gave you."

The Judge's face assumed a look of stony horror.

"Why, I've passed one, already!"

"You have?"

"Yes."

"Then you stand a right smart chance of bringin' up right heah with me."

"I had forgot it," groaned Hackland; "I nevah once thought of it until now. I passed it, supposing it was all right, and then forgot all about it. Oh! I'd give a thousand dollars if I were back in Yalobusha county!"

"Don't go until you help me out! There ain't no danger for a little while, an' I must be helped right away, or I shall spend my whole life in this gloomy Bastille. Say you won't desert me! Say you'll see a detective for me!"

"I will, and I reckon I'd better see him for myself, too, or I shall never get to go back home. Yes, yes; I'll attend to it, at once."

They separated and Mr. Hackland went out, but he was a most miserable man. He wanted to dodge and skulk in unfrequented places, but could follow the broad streets only. He was progressing in this fashion when a man bore down upon him, and he saw the manager of the matrimonial bureau, Mr. Norman Holmes.

"Halloa, old stock!" saluted that person, airily; "you are just the man I wanted to see. My client tells me she thinks you are going to skip the tra-la-la. Now, that won't do; you've promised to marry her, and the law holds you. See?"

"The—lady is wrong," faltered the Judge.

"That's all right if true, but we must have proof. Come with me to her house and put up five hundred dollars as security, or I'll have you arrested at once. What do you say?"

CHAPTER XVI.

PLAYING THE LAST CARDS.

ADREA started when she saw Pearl flourish the knife before Captain Warland's face. This was carrying matters too far, in her opinion, and she was about to enter the room when Basement Bert checked her.

"Don't be in a hurry," he advised. "She's only showing off, an' 'tain't likely she'll try to use the sword. She's a great bluffer, Pearl is; but you an' me know how innocent she is at heart."

The speaker looked slyly at Adrea, but the sarcasm was lost. Adrea was listening only to what was said within the room.

Captain Warland had made a disdainful gesture when the knife was thus flourished.

"Let us have no stage theatricals," he advised. "Actors, Indians and mummies can afford to act in an exaggerated style, but it don't go in real life. Put up your knife, madam!"

"You have not promised yet."

"I shall make you no promises."
 "Do you still say I must leave this house?"
 "Yes."

"I won't go!"
 "Madam, you are a woman of the world, and have been breaking the law so long that you ought to know what its terms are in a simple case. You say you won't leave, yet you must know I only have to invoke the law and you will go out in haste. Yes, and even a neighbor here, if he told of the gambling done by those within these walls, could accomplish the same result. You are absurd to say you will not go."

The adventuress drew herself up haughtily.
 "Shall I tell you why I won't go? It's because, if you order me out, the weight of the blow will all fall on Adrea. I've been playing a reckless bluff game for some time, and am where I can't turn many ways for Sunday; I make or break on a very small island, and the ocean roars all around. Adrea is my shield. Thus far the girl is just where she was when she left your roof; she has broken no law of the land, and I have guarded my language carefully, too; but if you molest me, the girl shall be in prison for some heinous offense inside a week!"

"Yet you claim to be her friend."
 "Bah! I hate the little fool!"
 "Woman, you are a fiend!"
 "Call me what you will."
 "Harm Adrea at your peril!" cried Warland, in a ringing voice. "She has been disobedient; she has turned against me, and I have tried to forget her; but she is dearer to me than my own life. I tell you, beware how you do injury to my child!"

Bert Lincoln could hear Adrea breathing quickly, heavily, by his side, and he felt exultant. Chance was giving her an opportunity to see exactly what Pearl Montessor was.

"Don't threaten me!" cried Pearl, angrily.
 "There is one way to beat you, and if you force me to it, that way shall be used. Do you see this knife?"

"Would you use it?"
 "Without hesitation. I am for Number One, first, last and always, and I don't care a rap for the Warland family, father or daughter. You can't bluff me, old man!"

Adrea left Bert's side suddenly and swept into the room.

"I am glad to know what you think of me!" she exclaimed, confronting Pearl.

The adventuress looked startled.
 "Adrea! Why are you here?"

"Because my name seems to be much in the conversation, and no one has more cause to be interested. I have heard you avow your position plainly, and am glad circumstances have made you so frank. So you hate and despise me? So you have only professed friendship because I was useful to you?"

"Wrong!" asserted Pearl, nervously. "It is not so."

"Your own lips have said it in my hearing."
 "I was trying to save myself from ruin."

"Pearl, I have suspected you, of late. I have been headstrong and opinionated, and was reckless enough to array myself against my father and brother for your sake, but the scene when Meredith was set upon by your gang was a revelation. I should have left you before had you not watched me so closely, but I now have friends at hand, unless my conduct has alienated them. I wonder if a father can forgive a daughter who has sinned deeply and persistently?"

She looked at Warland, who answered quickly.

"Adrea, there is always a place in my heart for you!"

"Fine talk!" sneered Pearl. "When the love-feast is over, call in the dogs to eat the fragments. What is fit for one cur is good for another!"

The adventuress was handling the knife nervously; she felt herself at the end of her rope, and was desperate enough to proceed to extreme measures if her fancy took a step in that direction. But now Bert Lincoln, who had followed Adrea only just inside the door, suddenly exclaimed:

"Here's more folks a-comin'!"
 And into the room came Norman Holmes, with "Judge" Hackland at his side.

There was general surprise, and Holmes, who had expected to find a clear coast to play the latest game against the Southerner, was annoyed and at fault. Of all men he least expected to see Captain Warland, for none of the gang knew he was owner of the house when they secured their new quarters; while the union of the adverse elements might bring trouble to him.

Only the Judge remained unmoved; he had expected to see his acquaintance of the matrimonial bureau, and though he kept well away from Pearl, he looked at her without surprise.

She was more troubled than he. She had worked the matrimonial bureau scheme bravely, but if all her victims got together at once, her future would grow cloudy.

"We seem to be intruding here," remarked Holmes, after an uncomfortable pause. "We will withdraw—"

"No; we'll settle the case right heah!" declared the Judge, with a sudden burst of defiance. "If my head is coming off, the soonah it's done, the bettah. I suppose this man is one of your kind?"

He pointed to Warland, who quickly answered:

"You never made a greater mistake; I don't keep such company. As for you, if I read you aright, you are not a city man, and I warn you that you're on dangerous ground."

"I know it to my sorrow!" groaned Hackland.

"What infamous scheme have you under way?" Warland demanded, addressing Holmes; but the latter pulled at the Judge's sleeve.

"Let us go out and speak later—"

"We'll speak right heah, I reckon," persisted Hackland, with growing courage. "Sah, I've promised to marry that woman, and then backed out. Can they put me in prison for twenty years, for it?"

"For refusing to marry her? Why, she's an old criminal whom the law would uphold in nothing. If that's the only noid they have on you, defy them!"

Warland had not given this advice without strong efforts at interruption on Holmes's part, but it was out at last, and the Yalobusha courage was high.

"Anyhow, she's got one husband," he declared. "She works the matrimonial bureau racket, and she and he get all the money out of victims they can!"

The Judge was proving a boomerang, and that, too, when least expected. The last doubt of Warland's daughter disappeared. She recognized in the simple Southerner a man upon whom city sharks would alight naturally, and his straightforward statement bore evidence of truth to a marked degree.

"Why do we waste time here?" Adrea demanded. "Even the paving-stones of the streets will yet rise up to accuse them. Father, if you can overlook my blindness, folly, ingratitude, take me away from here!"

"It shall be done."
 With these words, Warland turned upon the landlady, and added:

"Once more I say that you and your people must leave this house. If you do not go quietly you will be ejected—"

The sound of a struggle back of him, and a warning cry from Bert, caused the captain to turn. As he did so, Bert fell in a heap at his feet, the door closed with a bang, the key clicked in the lock, and only Warland, Bert, the Judge and the landlady remained in the room. Holmes, Pearl and Adrea had vanished.

Bert struggled up.
 "They've nabbed the gal!" he hurriedly exclaimed. "Holmes did it. I tried ter stop him, but he tumbled me over like a ten-pin."

The bold abduction had been accomplished so suddenly and silently, and with such unexpected success, that Warland was dumfounded and motionless. Not until he saw Bert fling himself against the closed door did he recover presence of mind enough to take part in the assault on that barrier.

The door was strong, however, and it was not until Hackland joined in the effort that it gave way. Then they hurried down stairs to find the front door locked, but a key hanging on a nail at one side proved to be a fit, and there the delay was but brief.

A little later they were on the stoop.
 There was no sign of the fugitives themselves, but a close carriage bowling away down the street gave Bert an idea. Holmes had come in the vehicle, and was making his escape the same way.

"I'll ketch them!" the boy cobbler cried; and then he ran down the street at full speed.

He was shrewd enough to understand that the cab in which Ches Day was waiting would come in handy just then, and he soon rushed up to it, breathless and excited.

"Run them down!" he gasped, pointing to the rapidly-disappearing carriage.

The wise cabman had resolved to be thoroughly loyal to his young master, and he gave his

horse the whip and away they went. If a lightning steed had been drawing them, it would not have been any too swift to suit Bert, just then.

"Whoop 'er up, Eliza Jane!" he cried. "We've got ter run 'em down, or our name is Dennis!"

CHAPTER XVII.

LEADING THE PURSUIT.

It was an exciting chase, and Bert was in his element. Victory might be deferred, but he did not see how it could be prevented.

"Hi, Ches!" he cried, "we're on the road ter glory, an' I imagine I see convict stripes sproutin' out on them varmints. Tell ye w'ot, ol' chap, rascality don't pay. Crooks run their race with some success, but they all wind up at Sing Sing an' enjoy hard labor as a reward. Let out another link, cabby!"

"Say! they're goin' on the boat!" exclaimed Ches.

"Eh? So they be, b'mighty! Let 'er slide, cabby; that mustn't be 'lowed. Run 'em down!"

They had approached Desbrosses Street Ferry, and Ches had rightly suspected the intention of the kidnappers to take the boat and cross to the Jersey side.

"Ain't it goin' ter be hard ter get 'em back, ef they git out o' the State?" Ches asked.

"I've heerd there is a good 'eal o' legal flum-doodle in some sech cases, but how it would be in this-case I don't know. We must nab 'em afore they touch Jersey soil. Shoot the luck!"

There was good cause for this sudden exclamation. The foremost carriage had crossed West street with a dash and was already in the ferry-house, but a long line of heavy teams swung in ahead of the cab, and the latter frail vehicle could not be forced through.

"Jump for it!" Bert cried, and himself set the example.

Teamsters think they own the streets of New York, and never give an inch when they can help it, but Bert was equal to the emergency. He caught a horse by the bit and stopped him short; then the boys dodged through the rumbling line of teams and darted toward the ferry-house, followed by the angry exclamations of the driver of the horse thus checked.

"Great Scott!" the young cobbler cried, "the boat is jest leavin'. Dig dust fer keeps!"

Down the ferry-house they went at full speed, and dashed across the plank, breathless, but victorious. A moment more and the gates closed sharply; they had gained passage by a "hair's-breadth," as it were.

The boat moved away.
 The kidnappers' carriage was to be seen with two others in the middle passage, but none of its occupants showed themselves.

"Now, what?" Ches asked. "We ain't run them down on New York soil, after all."

"My frien', the cat is in the fire, but I hope all the feathers won't be singed off from her tail. Jersey perleecement hev hearts as big as the head ter a dude's cane, an' they'll listen to our tale o' woe an'— Hullo!"

Bert stopped. A man was leaning against the rail and looking thoughtfully down the river. He recognized Meredith Warland, and ran up to him at once.

"Say, mister, hev you ketched 'em?" he cried. Meredith started, and then, recognizing the speaker, shook his head gravely.

"My sister is still in their hands. I have today secured the arrest of James Draper and Sadie De Piercy, the allies of Holmes and the Montessor woman; but they cannot, or will not, give me any information in regard to my sister."

"You've no idea where she is?"

"None whatever."

"She's near you."

"Near me?"

"On this boat?"

Meredith flashed a quick look into the ladies' cabin.

"Are you in earnest?"

"I be; but you needn't look 'at way. Adrea ain't there. D'ye see that carriage?"

"Yes."

"She's there, held by Holmes and Pearl. She's come to her senses, Adrea has; an' she'd be with Captain Warland this minute ef the crooks hadn't played a bold game an' gobbled her. Ches an' I pursood, but was too late ter stop 'em from takin' this boat. Now, we're on our way ter Jersey. Will we be allowed ter lay hold on 'em, an' take 'em back ter New York?"

"I know but little of law, but I presume there would be a good deal of delay over extradition."

If we only could manage to keep them on the boat and take them back to the city—"

"Don't see any way ter do it."

"Nor I."

Meredith had grown very much in earnest. He had seen no one in the carriage, but Bert's past record proved him worthy of confidence; he took the boy's word for all, and was elated at the prospect of recovering Adrea. This elation was only dampened by the fact that the boat was steadily approaching New Jersey soil, and that much trouble might result after they landed there.

Suddenly Ches Day exclaimed:

"What's the matter with our craft?"

Sure enough, the boat had come as near to a stop as the current would allow, and was drifting down-stream.

"Something wrong with the steering apparatus, I think," a passenger suggested.

There was a short delay, and then they began to move back toward the New York shore. As they were not half-way across, it became evident that this step was taken as the shortest way of getting the disabled craft and her passengers to a place of safety.

Bert shook Meredith's hand exuberantly.

"Whoop!" he cried; "I guess we ain't goin' ter sample Jersey soil, *this* trip."

Norman Holmes left the carriage and approached a deck-hand. He looked very much troubled.

"What does this mean?" he demanded.

"Broken down."

"But why are we returning to New York?"

"Shortest way."

"But I am in great haste to catch a train."

Thus far the crook had seen none of his enemies, but Bert moved quickly forward and exclaimed:

"The train fer Sing Sing don't go until this P. M."

Holmes turned, saw the speaker and Meredith, and even his brazen assurance was not proof against such a disagreeable surprise. He looked at them for a moment in silence, and then again faced the deck-hand.

"Where is the pilot? I'll give a hundred dollars to be landed in Jersey!"

"You've only to take the next boat back," was the nonchalant response, and the deck-hand walked away.

"General, your jig is up!" Bert announced. "You'll be landed on New York soil, an' I'm bettin' you don't leave the State fer the next ten year."

Meredith pushed past the crook and moved toward the carriage, but Holmes caught his arm.

"I'll compromise with you," the rascal urged, hurriedly.

Warland shook off the arm, and, without a word, walked to the carriage. The open door revealed Adrea, held by Pearl's strong arm. In the latter's free hand was a revolver which she made haste to conceal. By means of that weapon Adrea had been frightened into silence—an old trick with the gang, though Pearl was too prudent, if not too good, to use it.

Adrea uttered a cry of joy.

"Saved!" she exclaimed. "Oh, my brother, this is the happiest moment of my life!"

Holmes regarded Bert with fury which he could hardly control.

"We owe all this to you!" he snarled.

"Mister, I am proud ter say you do—ter me an' the broken boat. I started the rifle, an' the boat fell inter line as my ally."

Holmes made no reply, though his face was a study. He gazed alternately at Meredith and Adrea, but did not attempt a word of conversation. He knew that threats and excuses would alike be useless, and that arrest awaited him. The boat was slowly beating back to its slip, and he had no power to reverse the order of events. It was a bitter experience, however.

Nearer grew the drop, and the boat finally touched. Bert was the first off. He went as a messenger for Meredith Warland, and a policeman soon confronted Holmes. The latter yielded without a word, and the long, hard fight was over.

James Draper saw fit to turn State's evidence and secure what clemency he could; and his story concerned not only the Warlands but Mr. Andrew Moss. The result was that the latter was set free.

When the conspirators learned that Moss was again in New York, they determined to "bleed" him anew. The first step was to leave a decoy note, signed Abram Alden, but the encounter on Astor Place alarmed them, and they decided

to get rid of Andrew, rather than seek his money.

Sadie de Piercy went again to the house, secured the note—on the occasion when Bert saw her there—and left the counterfeit money.

The money worked its evil and placed Moss in prison, but his prompt release left no stain on his name. "Judge" Hackland saved himself from trouble by reclaiming the bogus bill he had innocently passed, before its nature was discovered.

The Southerners would have gone home at once—Andrew had recovered his valuable legal papers—but they were wanted as witnesses against Holmes and Pearl. They stayed, but, the day after the verdict, Moss, Hackland and Long started for their homes. They are still there, sadder and wiser men, but they hide what they do not want known, and tell stories of New York that amaze their friends. The narrators would find it hard to prove all of them.

Holmes, Draper, Pearl and Sadie are in prison, and it will be long before New York will be inflicted with their presence again. "Buck," the keeper of the old house in Jersey, was looked for in vain.

The Warland family was reunited. Adrea bitterly repented her past folly, but her father and brother never reproached her.

Basement Bert and his friend, Ches, were generously rewarded by Captain Warland, and, engaged in better work than cobbling, bid fair to reach out to successful careers in life.

THE END.

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